

Poetry of Turmoil

Stephanos Sgouropoulos to Alexios III Megas Komnenos

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Stephanos Sgouropoulos, a little-known Trapezuntine poet of the early and middle fourteenth century, has left us about 1,500 verses, the bulk of which are addressed to the emperor Alexios III Megas Komnenos (1338–1390, r. 1349–1390).¹ When previous scholars have referred to him at all, they have usually described him as an encomiast of the emperor, writing servile verses to curry favor.² Here is an example of these allegedly encomiastic verses:

Ἐπὶ τοῦ παμβασιλέως
στήσομαι κατήγορός σου,
ἀνταγωνιστὴς γενναῖος,
παλαιστὴς ἰσχυρογνώμων,

1 On Sgouropoulos, see *PLP*, no. 25034. For the identification of the addressed emperor, see below, pp. 225–26.

2 See, among others, K. Krumbacher, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Litteratur von Justinian bis zum Ende des Oströmischen Reiches* (527–1453), with the assistance of A. Ehrhard and H. Gelzer, 2nd rev. ed., HAW 9.1 (Munich, 1897), 782; J. O. Rosenqvist, “Byzantine Trebizond: A Provincial Literary Landscape,” in *Byzantino-Nordica 2004: Papers Presented at the International Symposium of Byzantine Studies Held on 7 May 2004 in Tartu, Estonia*, ed. I. Volt and J. Päll, Morgensterntsi Seltsi toimetus 2 (Tartu, 2005), 29–51, at 41–42; N. Trahoulia, *The Greek Alexander Romance: Venice Hellenic Institute Codex Gr. 5* (Athens, 1997), 33; A. G. K. Savvidis, *Ιστορία της αυτοκρατορίας των Μεγάλων Κομνηνών της Τραπεζούντας (1204–1461)*, 3rd rev. ed. (Thessaloniki, 2016), 201; A. Rhoby, “Poetry on Commission in Late Byzantium (13th–15th Century),” in *A Companion to Byzantine Poetry*, ed. W. Hörandner, A. Rhoby, and N. Zagklas, Brill’s Companions to the Byzantine World 4 (Leiden, 2019), 264–304, at 288–89.

θῆρ ἁλλόμενος ἀγρίως,
λύκος τοὺς ὀδόντας βρύχων.
Σάλπιγγα τὴν γλώσσαν θήσω
καὶ τὰ χεῖλη φυσητήρας
καὶ φωνήσω καὶ βοήσω
καὶ λαλήσω καὶ κραυγάσω
...
καὶ πεσοῦμαι πρὸς τοὺς πόδας
τοῦ κριτοῦ μου καὶ θεοῦ μου
λέγων δάκρυσι καὶ γόοις,
ὅτι βασιλεὺς ἐκεῖνος
οὐ σισύραν, οὐ διφθέραν,
οὐδὲ μηλωτὴν, οὐ δέρας

...
δέδωκέ ποτέ μοι δῶρον,
ἀλλ’ ἀντὶ τοῦ δοῦναι μᾶλλον
καὶ φιλοτιμήσασθαί με

...
ἔθλιψεν, ἡτίμασέ με,
καθυπέβαλεν ἐσχάτη
δυστυχία καὶ πενία,

...
πρὸς βυθὸν κατήγαγέ με
τῆς ἐσχάτης ἀπωλείας.³

3 Sgouropoulos, *Poem* 3.180–89, 194–99, 203–5, 210–12, 220–21 (T. Papatheodorides, ed., “Ἀνέκδοτοι στίχοι Στεφάνου τοῦ Σγουροπούλου,” *Ἀρχ.Πόντ.* 19 [1954]: 262–82, at 273).

Before the almighty King I will stand as your accuser, a brave opponent, an adversary with a strong mind, a savagely leaping beast, a teeth-gnashing wolf. And I will use my tongue as a trumpet and my lips as tubes, and I will speak and cry aloud, and I will shriek and shout . . . and I will fall before the feet of my judge and God, shedding tears and wailing, I will tell him that this emperor gave neither a hide nor a goatskin nor a sheepskin nor leather . . . as a gift to me, but rather, instead of gifting and offering presents to me, . . . he oppressed and disdained me, pushed me down into utmost misery and poverty, . . . drawing me down to the depths of ultimate perdition.

This is not the kind of praise that one usually finds in Byzantine poetry. Quite to the contrary, Sgouropoulos addresses Alexios with words of hatred and rancor. He promises to plead with God at the Day of the Last Judgment that Alexios, who had not understood how to behave like a true emperor, be condemned for his misdeeds. His only remedy in life, Sgouropoulos continues, is that before God all men are equal, and they will get what they deserve. In contemporary Byzantium, a world where political criticism was mostly veiled, recognizable only to those who knew how to read between the lines, an author who addresses a hearty wish for the damnation of the emperor—to the emperor himself—is truly extraordinary.

Sgouropoulos's poems are deeply rooted in the social and political context of mid-fourteenth-century Trebizond, offering us valuable commentary on a time of political upheaval and uncertainty. Following the death of Alexios II in 1330, and still worse after the death of Alexios III's father, Basil, in 1340, Trebizond experienced a period of dire systemic instability, of violent dissension within the aristocracy, and of a remarkable political fragility, resulting in a rapid succession of empresses and emperors, pawns in the hands of powerful political factions. On top of that, Trebizond was under great pressure: from repeated Turkish attacks; from the depredations of the Genoese and the Venetians, who had important colonies in Trebizond; and from several devastating epidemics. This was the background to the accession of Alexios III, a boy of eleven years, to the imperial throne in 1349, with the

help of the faction of the Scholarioi, one of the most powerful families in Trebizond.⁴

This period of upheaval and insecurity constitutes the background of Sgouropoulos's poems to the emperor. Their content ranges from exhortation to criticism, from praise to abuse. Laced heavily with irony, they play cleverly with a rich diversity of rhetorical and literary guises. However, Sgouropoulos's small poetic oeuvre has been both neglected and misunderstood in scholarship. This study, offering the first in-depth analysis of his poems, proceeds in two steps: First, Sgouropoulos's poetic corpus is introduced with a discussion of its transmission, content, dates of origin as well as its use of language and meter. Second, the entangled strands of praise, abuse, and advice—essential to its composition—are analyzed through a close reading of the individual poems as well as a consideration of the generic logics underpinning these texts. It turns out that, while Sgouropoulos's poems are deeply embedded in Byzantine literary tradition, their multifarious character and genre-shifting modulations have no equal in (later) Byzantine poetry. As volatile literary experiments, they hold up a poetic mirror to a world in turmoil.

4 On the history of Trebizond, see most recently S. P. Karpov, *Istoriia Trapezundskoi imperii*, 2nd rev. ed., Novaia Vizantiiskaia biblioteka. Istochniki (Saint Petersburg, 2017) (Greek translation of the first edition S. P. Karpov, *Η αυτοκρατορία της Τραπεζούντας και τα δυτικοευρωπαϊκά κράτη στους 130–150 αιώνες* [Athens, 2016]); (with caution) Savvidis, *Istoria*; and A. Bryer and D. Winfield, *The Byzantine Monuments and Topography of the Pontos*, DOS 20 (Washington, DC, 1985). On cultural history, see R. S. Stefec, "Aspekte griechischer Buchproduktion in der Schwarzmeerregion," *Scripta* 7 (2014): 205–33; R. S. Stefec, "Die Grabrede des Konstantinos Lukites auf Kaiser Alexios II. Megas Komnenos: Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte der byzantinischen Provinz," *Néa Pólyi* 15 (2018): 193–249; and R. S. Stefec, "Beiträge zur Urkundentätigkeit trapezuntinischer Herrscher in den Jahren 1204–1461," *Néa Pólyi* 17 (2020): 255–397. The chronicle of Michael Panaretos, a key source on the history of Trebizond, has recently been re-edited by S. P. Karpov, R. Shukurov, and A. M. Kryukov, ed., *Mikhail Panaret: O velikikh kominakh (Trapezundskaia khronika)*, Novaia Vizantiiskaia biblioteka, Istochniki (St. Petersburg, 2019), but see still O. Lampsides, "Μιχαὴλ τοῦ Παναρέτου Περὶ τῶν Μεγάλων Κομνηνῶν," *Arch. Pólyi* 22 (1958): 5–89. For a translation of, and valuable commentary on, the text, see S. Kennedy, *Two Works on Trebizond: Michael Panaretos; Bessarion*, DOML 52 (Cambridge, MA, 2019).

Table 1. Codicological Units Containing Sgouropoulos's Poetry (Jerusalem, Greek Patriarchate, Panagios Taphos 370)

Unit	Poems	Folios	Scribe	Meter	Remarks
1	1–6a	455r–69v	A(1)	Octosyllable	Written in two columns. 6a ends in the middle of a sentence.
Lacuna					
2	6b	470r	A(2)	Political verse	Written in two columns; initials to each line on each column in a brighter ink. 6b starts in the middle of a sentence.
	7–8	470r–71v	B	Political verse	Presented line-by-line. Sometimes space at the caesura.

The Poetic Corpus of Stephanos Sgouropoulos

Transmission

Sgouropoulos's poems are transmitted in a single manuscript (Jerusalem, Panagios Taphos 370; Diktyon no. 35603) compiled in the sixteenth century by Germanos, Patriarch of Jerusalem (1543–1579), from quires from several older manuscripts.⁵ Poems 1, 7, and 8 were edited by Athanasios Papadopoulos-Kerameus in 1891 and then Poems 2–6b by Triantaphyllos Papatheodorides in 1954; both editors claimed that the codicological unit dating from the fourteenth century, which includes Sgouropoulos's works, contains eight poems, all written by the same author.⁶ The rubric to these poems reads: Τοῦ πρωτονοταρίου Τραπεζοῦντος Στεφάνου τοῦ Σγουροπούλου πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα κυρὸν Ἀλέξιον τὸν Κομνηνὸν στίχοι ἐγκωμιαστικοί ("By the *protonotarios* of Trebizond, Stephanos Sgouropoulos, to the emperor lord Alexios Komnenos encomiastic verses," f. 455r). They are found on ff. 455r–71v, which are made up of two units copied by two different hands (table 1).⁷

On ff. 455r–69v (unit 1), a fourteenth-century calligraphic hand (scribe A), similar in style to that of the Hodegon, copied Poems 1–6a (A[1]).⁸ Poems 6b as well as 7 and 8 are written on ff. 470r–71v (unit 2). Poem 6b was copied by the same hand as Poems 1–6a, but in a different ink or with a different pen (A[2]). In contrast to ff. 455r–69v, the scribe wrote the first letter of each line in each column in a brighter ink (possibly red) on f. 470r (Poem 6b; fig. 1), barely visible in the reproduction. Poems 7 and 8 were copied by a different contemporary hand (scribe B), similar to one acquainted with chancery practice. This second hand also added the second part of the rubric, which contains the name of the poems' addressee and the generic classification of "encomiastic verses" (πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα κυρὸν Ἀλέξιον τὸν Κομνηνὸν στίχοι ἐγκωμιαστικοί).⁹ There is thus a clear difference in the style of transmission between the codicological units 1 and 2. This fits well with the form of the poems, as 1–6a are composed in octosyllables, while 6b–8 are political verses. Scribe A, who copied Poem 6b in unit 2, mistook the metrical form of this poem and copied it in the same column style as the previous octosyllables, splitting the political verses into two hemistichs. Content, meter, and grammar make it clear that 6a and 6b do not form a single text, but are parts of two different poems (6a breaks up in the middle of

5 See A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Ἱεροσολυμιτικὴ Βιβλιοθήκη ἤτοι κατάλογος τῶν ἐν ταῖς βιβλιοθήκαις τοῦ ἀγιοτάτου ἀποστολικοῦ τε καὶ καθολικοῦ ὀρθοδόξου πατριαρχικοῦ θρόνου τῶν Ἱεροσολύμων καὶ πάσης Παλαιστίνης ἀποκειμένων ἐλληνικῶν κωδίκων* (St. Petersburg, 1891; repr. Brussels, 1963), 1:388–93; on Sgouropoulos, 393.

6 A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Ἀνάλεκτα Ἱεροσολυμιτικῆς σταχυολογίας ἢ συλλογὴ ἀνεκδότων καὶ σπανίων ἐλληνικῶν συγγραμμάτων περὶ τῶν κατὰ τὴν Ἐφάν ὀρθοδόξων ἐκκλησιῶν καὶ μάλιστα τῆς τῶν Παλαιστινῶν* (St. Petersburg, 1891; repr. Brussels, 1963), 1:431–37 (Poems 1, 7, 8); Papatheodorides, "Ἀνέκδοτοι στίχοι" (Poems 2–6).

7 For a reproduction of the manuscript, see <https://www.loc.gov/resource/amedmonastery.00279391925-jo/?sp=461&r=0.49,0.077,0.407,0.25,0> (20 March 2022).

8 F. 465 is blank. Poem 3 ends on f. 464v and Poem 4 starts on f. 466r.

9 For a description of the hands, see Stefec, "Grabrede," 199, n. 13. He also suggests that ff. 470r–71v might be an autograph but fails to give any arguments for this. There are no direct hints (such as authorial corrections) to support this hypothesis.



Fig. 1. Jerusalem, Greek Patriarchate, Panagios Taphos 370, ff. 469v-70r. Library of Congress Collection of Manuscripts in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

the sentence).¹⁰ Poems 7 and 8, written by scribe B, are presented in a stichic layout (line-by-line), as is common with political verse. From both the codicological and the formal aspects, one can conclude that there is a lacuna between units 1 and 2. The two parts of this poetic corpus are thus clearly set apart from each other. As any further information, such as rubrics preceding unit 2, is lost to us, it is impossible to tell whether these texts do indeed belong to the same poetic corpus written entirely by Sgouropoulos.

Content

Sgouropoulos's poems are complex in style, exhibit a rich narrative, and contain a wealth of ideas. Their content can be summarized as follows:

- Poem 1: An exhortation to Alexios to fortify the city of Kerasous. Lengthy reflections on imperial virtues.¹¹
- Poem 2: Another exhortation. An allegorical interpretation of three stones as virtues

¹¹ The line numbering of this poem in Papadopoulos-Kerameus's edition is erroneous from v. 275 onwards. In sum, the text is composed of 299 verses, not 300.

¹⁰ Already noticed by Papatheodorides, "Ανέκδοτοι στίχοι," 262–63.

- and an ekphrasis of the ideal ruler are used to teach proper imperial behavior.
- Poem 3: A vituperation of the emperor. Sgouropoulos promises to accuse him at the Day of the Last Judgment for his misdeeds.
- Poem 4: On the bad behavior of the emperor's father and how Alexios is repeating it. Ironic praise.
- Poem 5: Sgouropoulos offers instruction to the emperor and advises him not to listen to false counselors. Description of an "abominable owl" from which the emperor should steer clear.
- Poem 6a: Ironic praise of the emperor, who is said to feed the aforementioned owl to his subjects.
- Poem 6b: Plea to the emperor to give gifts to his teacher, the first-person speaker.
- Poem 7: Praise of the emperor and a threat to an anonymous Latin.
- Poem 8: Exhortation to the emperor to make peace with his adversary, a dux.

Several passages from Poems 1–6a suggest that they are presented in chronological order. In Poem 1, the speaker explicitly tells the addressee that he is approaching the emperor for the first time (vv. 1.23–24). Poem 2 starts with the notion that Sgouropoulos has been importuning the emperor with *frequent* reminders (vv. 2.1–2), and the speaker emphasizes that it is *once again* his affection for the emperor that has compelled him (v. 2.20) to write. Similarly, in Poem 3 he states that the emperor may now have had enough of Sgouropoulos's requests, suggesting that the latter had already annoyed him (vv. 3.35–38). Poems 5 and 6a are connected via the image of the owl. Apart from these direct references to other texts, we find a marked shift in the character of the poems. Whereas Poems 1 and 2 are largely paraenetic, from Poem 3 onwards, Sgouropoulos criticizes the emperor sharply, thus indicating an evolving relationship between Sgouropoulos and his addressee.

Poems 6b–8 do not comprise the sequel to 1–6a, a group without doubt connected by a common addressee. The two sets of poems are very different in both form and content: 6b–8 are written in political verse rather than in octosyllables and depict the emperor in unreservedly positive terms, sharply in contrast with

the blend of entreaty, exhortation, admonishment, faint praise, and frank abuse that so remarkably characterizes poems 1–6a.

Dating

What little information we have about Sgouropoulos himself comes from the rubric to his poems, where we learn his name, his profession as protonotarios, his domiciliation in Trebizond, and the name of his addressee, the emperor Alexios.¹² As argued above, Poems 1–6a were most likely addressed to the same emperor, and historical references in these poems allow us to identify him—and also thus to date these texts.¹³ While several passages in the poems can tentatively be linked to documented events, there are three clear historical landmarks that allow for a high degree of certainty in our reckonings. The first landmark consists of an allusion to Alexios's aunt in Poem 4, where the author speaks about the addressee's father (also an emperor) and the latter's sister (Alexios's aunt), who was herself an empress.¹⁴ The only person who fits this description is Anna Anachoutlou (d. 1342, r. 1341–1342),¹⁵ sister of Basil Megas Komnenos (d. 1340, r. 1332–1340). Anna seized the throne from Basil's first wife, Eirene (d. 1342, r. 1340–1341), in 1341, only months after Eirene had herself assumed power upon her former husband's death.¹⁶ Basil must thus be the father of the addressed emperor:

12 His place of origin is unknown. Stefec, "Grabrede," 223, n. 70, suggests that he hailed from Trebizond, basing his argument on the use of some Pontic words in Sgouropoulos's poetry (especially *καρβάνιν* [Poem 3.346] and *χουχούρης* [5.106 and 12.4, 6a.24]); yet these merely prove acquaintance with Trapezuntine culture and the Pontic dialect, not necessarily a personal origin. Also the name Sgouropoulos is usually associated with Constantinople and the Byzantine mainland, while no individual bearing this name is known to be of Trapezuntine origin (cf. *PLP*, nos. 24997–25036; see also A. Asp, "Trebizond and Constantinople: 1204–1453" [PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2019], 185–86, but with mistaken considerations of Poem 6a). Overall, the evidence is inconclusive.

13 For a bibliography of earlier arguments for the (controversial) identification of the emperor, see Stefec, "Grabrede," 204–205, n. 29; Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Ανάλεκτα*, ιζ'–κ'.

14 Poem 4.53–54: *τὰς ἀπὸ τῆς κασιγνήτης / τῆς αὐγούσης τῆς δεσποίνης / ἐπιφέρων δεξιώσεις* ("bringing greetings from his sister, the augusta, the empress").

15 *PLP*, no. 12059.

16 *PLP*, no. 12092.

Alexios III.¹⁷ The second landmark is a reference in Poem 1 to the recapture of Kerasous, the second most important city in the Trapezuntine empire, situated to the west of Trebizond.¹⁸ Sgouropoulos, honoring the emperor for this exploit and exhorting him to build a fort for the city, must be referring to its capture and devastation by the Genoese in 1348, as described by Michael Panaretos in his chronicle, and its subsequent reconquest, which, according to the fourteenth-century official Andrew Libadenos, had taken place sometime before 1354.¹⁹ Poem 1 can thus be dated with confidence to between Alexios's assumption of power in 1349 and 1354.²⁰ Finally, Poem 6a can be dated to sometime after 28 September 1351, the day of Alexios's wedding with Theodora Kantakouzene (d. before June

1400), as it contains a reference to the emperor's wife (vv. 6a.38–40).²¹

A further historical problem is posed by the metaphoric description of an opponent of Sgouropoulos as a nefarious “owl” (Poems 5.100–143, 5.218–28, and 6a.19–35), the identity of whom remains unknown. Niketas Scholarios (d. 1361) and Michael Panaretos would each be a plausible candidate. The latter served the emperor as notarios from 1350 onwards and was protonotarios by 1363.²² Sgouropoulos's rage would certainly be explicable if he had held this office before, and Panaretos had edged him out.²³ Unfortunately, we do not know when exactly Sgouropoulos held the office of protonotarios, nor for how long, so the hypothesis cannot be verified.²⁴ Niketas Scholarios, on the other hand, was a protagonist in Trapezuntine politics in the 1340s and 1350s and counted among those propelling the boy Alexios into power, only to revolt against him in 1355. The dead owl, struck down by the emperor's sword, might refer to the defeated Scholarios after this revolt.²⁵ Finally, the onomatopoeic designation of the owl with the Pontic words *χορρχουρίων* and *χορρχούρην* (“screeching” and “the screecher,” v. 5.106), might be interpreted as a verbal allusion to the office of *χορρτζής*, a bodyguard of the emperor.²⁶ While the historical existence of this office has been firmly established, no record of the individual officeholders has survived.²⁷ All in all, the allusions in

17 According to the chronicle of Michael Panaretos, Basil died on 6 April 1340, a date falling close to that of the death of Alexios's father on 30 April 1340, as Sgouropoulos records it (Poem 4.15–16), thus corroborating the proposed identification of the emperor's father.

18 On Kerasous, see Bryer and Winfield, *Pontos*, 126–34. Note, however, that they wrongly date Sgouropoulos to the reign of Alexios II, which affects their narrative about the history of the city.

19 See M. Panaretos, *Chronicle* 86.14–15 (Karpov, Shukurov, and Kryukov, *Mikhail Panaret*, 86) and A. Libadenos, *Periegesis* 73.32–33 (O. Lampsides, ed., *Ἀνδρέου Λιβადηνοῦ βίος καὶ ἔργα* [Athens, 1975]). However, as some scholars identified Sgouropoulos's addressee as Alexios II Megas Komnenos (1282–1330, r. 1297–1330; *PLP*, no. 12084), basing their argument on Poem 1, they identified the capture of Kerasous with Alexios II's victory over the Turks in this city in 1301 (cf. Bryer and Winfield, *Pontos*, 129, n. 42; Karpov, *Istoriia Trapezundskoi imperii*, 567). My dating of Poem 4 excludes this interpretation.

20 R. Stefec in a written communication from 3 April 2021 has argued that the poem includes hints that Alexios might have been co-emperor at the time of the recapture, not sole emperor. The phenomenon of co-emperorship is well attested for Trebizond, but that Alexios could have been the co-emperor to Michael Megas Komnenos (1285–after 1355, r. 1344–1349) had not been suggested before (on co-emperorship in Trebizond, see Stefec, “Urkundentätigkeit,” 385–87). In Poem 1.53–54, Sgouropoulos states that by fortifying Kerasous and stabilizing his power, Alexios should “advance to the summit of the whole empire” (οὕτω διαβῆς πρὸς ὕψος / τὸ τῆς ὅλης βασιλείας). While this may be understood as a rather general statement that Alexios would secure the foundations of his power, it might also refer to him taking undivided control (which in the moment of the poem's composition he did not have). If Alexios was indeed co-emperor, the poem could have been written at any moment after the attack of the Genoese in 1348, even before Alexios assumed sole power.

21 On Theodora, see *PLP*, no. 12068. On the date of their wedding, see Panaretos, *Chronicle* 88.30–36 (Karpov, Shukurov, and Kryukov, *Mikhail Panaret*, 88).

22 See S. Kennedy, “Michael Panaretos in Context: A Historiographical Study of the Chronicle *On the Emperors of Trebizond*,” *BZ* 112.3 (2019): 899–934, at 902.

23 See Kennedy, “Michael Panaretos in Context,” 920–21.

24 Kennedy, “Michael Panaretos in Context,” 921, n. 95, additionally argues that Constantine Loukites was protonotarios under Alexios II for almost his entire reign and, following his death, under the reigns of Andronikos III, Manuel II, and Basil Megaloi Komnenoi. The last reliable reference to him in this office comes from 1336, leaving little time for Sgouropoulos to have filled this position until that date. On the life of Loukites, see Stefec, “Grabrede,” 200–206.

25 On Scholarios, see Karpov, *Istoriia Trapezundskoi imperii*, 216–22.

26 On the Pontic background of these words, see A. Papadopoulou, *Ιστορικὸν λέξικον τῆς Ποντικῆς διαλέκτου*, *Ἀρχ. Πόντ.* Παράρτημα 3 (Athens, 2016), 1066–67. On language, see below.

27 The office is mentioned in the Trapezuntine list of dignitaries 345.18 (J. Verpeaux, ed., *Pseudo-Kodinos: Traité des offices*, *Le monde byzantin* 1 [Paris, 1966], 345). It is a loan word from Turkish-Mongolian

Sgouropoulos's poems are too vague to allow for confident interpretation on this point.

Establishing the chronological and sociopolitical background to Poems 6b–8 is even more challenging. While Poem 6b does not contain any historical references, Poems 7 and 8 deal with a political conflict involving Trebizond. There are some hints of a relationship to Sgouropoulos's other poems,²⁸ which might identify the addressed emperor as Alexios III. Poem 7 contains extensive praise of the emperor and a political polemic against the infidel Latins, to one of whom the poem is addressed, but contains little historical information. We learn only that the emperor was married (v. 7.21), at some geographic distance from the poem's speaking "I" (vv. 7.15–22), and a scion of the Komnenoi (v. 7.49). If the poem concerns Alexios, it could only have been written after 28 September 1351, due to the reference to the emperor's marriage. Poem 8 is likewise addressed to the emperor and refers to a conflict with a certain rebellious δούξ, with whom the speaker advises the emperor to reconcile. It is said that the emperor received help from the καπετάνος, coming from Caffa. The interpretation of the poem depends on the problematic identification of this δούξ: it could either be the megas dux Niketas Scholarios, suggesting that the poem was written in the context of the latter's revolt against Alexios in 1355; or it could refer to the Venetian doge,²⁹ and thus to a revolt of the Venetians that the Genoese helped to suppress. Michael Panaretos describes a conflict between these two Italian groups in 1352, but the actual events (the Venetians came to Trebizond to attack the Genoese) do not fit with the poem.³⁰ Still worse, both of these dates are problematic, as in v. 8.18, the speaker urges an effort at reconciliation with the δούξ upon the emperor and his "sons" (μετὰ τῶν υἱῶν σου), the plural form indicating that the emperor in question had at least two of them. As Alexios III's first (illegitimate,

but honored) son Andronikos was born in 1355,³¹ and his second (and legitimate) son Basileios only in 1358,³² the poem could not have been written earlier than this latter date—several years after Scholarios's revolt.³³ It is also doubtful whether Sgouropoulos's engagement by Alexios could have lasted that long, given the vitriol contained in his other poems, most likely written in the early 1350s.

It is thus impossible to date Poems 6b–8 with any certainty, and considering the differences in the poems in terms of form and of presentation in the manuscript, one wonders if they indeed belong to the same corpus as 1–6a. They were certainly written on a different occasion, maybe for a different emperor (or even by a different author?), but the meager and ambiguous evidence does not allow for any reliable conclusions to be drawn. For these reasons, poems 6b–8 will not be taken into account in the following analysis of Sgouropoulos's poetic oeuvre.

Language and Meter

While a full analysis of Sgouropoulos's use of language and meter will have to await a critical edition of the texts, some preliminary observations may help to situate his poems more deeply in their contexts. Sgouropoulos's Poems 1–6a are written in unprosodic octosyllables, a meter developed from ancient anacreontics, which, by the fourteenth century, had taken a rather fixed rhythmic form.³⁴ Sgouropoulos generally follows these accentual rules: they are based on a duple rhythm, where one verse consists of two cola, with stresses always on the seventh, often on the third, occasionally on the first or fifth, but almost never on the even

qurçi/qorçi. On the office and its etymology, see R. Shukurov, *The Byzantine Turks, 1204–1461*, The Medieval Mediterranean 105 (Leiden, 2016), 266–67 and 412.

28 See, for instance, the use of the neologism *παγκοσμοπόθητος* in 1.22 and 8.27, unattested elsewhere (cf. *LBG* s.v.); and the direct addressing of the infidel Latin at the end of Poem 7.43–50, which resembles that of the abominable owl in Poem 5.218–27.

29 For the translation of δούξ as doge, see *LBG* s.v.

30 See Panaretos, *Chronicle* 90.17–18 (Karpov, Shukurov, and Kryukov, *Mikhail Panaret*, 90).

31 *PLP*, no. 12086.

32 *PLP*, no. 12089.

33 Stefec, "Grabrede," 205, n. 29, suggests putting the poem instead into the context of the conflict with the Genoese in 1348 (in the course of which Kerasous was burnt), but this would mean that the emperor would have to be identified with Michael Megas Komnenos, who at this time was sixty-three years old, which does not fit with the reference to the addressee's youth (v. 8.27).

34 Fundamentally, see still T. Nissen, *Die byzantinischen Anakreonten*, SBMünchen (Munich, 1940). More recently, see M. D. Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres: Texts and Contexts*, 2 vols., WByzSt 2.4 (Vienna, 2003–2019), 2:290–91, 323–24, 333–36, etc. (see index); F. Ciccolella, *Cinque poeti bizantini: Anacreontee dal Barberiniano greco 310*, Hellenica 5 (Alessandria, 2000).

syllables.³⁵ Although the octosyllable was not nearly as widespread as the dodecasyllable and the political verse, it was used occasionally throughout the late Byzantine period and the entire Greek speaking world, regardless of the language register (learned, vernacular, and everything in between).³⁶ From the fourteenth or fifteenth century onwards, it became popular in the vernacular tradition.³⁷ This evidence suggests that the octosyllable, at this time, was a meter particularly suited for a wider audience, who would have attained varying levels of education. In Sgouropoulos's case, too, the meter facilitates immediate understanding, as the rather short verses help the readers or listeners to structure the ideas neatly in their minds. However, other linguistic features show that a good amount of learning was required for full comprehension of these poems.

The combination of accessibility with an elevated, high-register style is also evident in the patterns of Sgouropoulos's use of language: the morphology and syntax in particular adhere to the rules of learned Greek, while the octosyllable, with its short cola, prompted a mainly paratactic, and thus easily comprehensible, syntax. On the other hand, Sgouropoulos's clever use of numerous hapax legomena and rare words demonstrates a considerable degree of literary achievement on his part. This is shown in his coining of novel compounds (such as *λιθομαργαροφόρος* or *σιδηρογνωμέω*) and otherwise unattested nouns derived from commonplace verbal stems.³⁸ The form *δυσηκωφούσας* (Poem 1.159, from *δυσηκωφέω*) is furthermore a blending of the two rare

words *δυσκωφέω* and *δυσηκοέω* (both “to be hard of hearing,” see *LSJ* s.v.), possibly a case of a misremembered extravagant lexical choice.³⁹ Sgouropoulos commands an extensive vocabulary, as demonstrated for instance by the employment of numerous synonyms or words from the same semantic fields in parallel verses (cf., e.g., Poem 2.362–64: *αἰσχρολογία*, *μωρολογία*, and *ψυχοφθόροι ῥήσεις*; Poem 3.198–201: *ἡ σισύρα*, *ἡ διφθέρα*, *ἡ μηλωτή*, *τὸ δέρας*, *τὸ ἱμάτιον*, *ἡ σκέπη*, and *τὸ λινούν*; Poem 4.5–6: *ὁ γεννήτωρ*, *ὁ τοκεύς*, and *ὁ φυτοσπόρος*). He makes use of such linguistic variety—especially in parallelisms (one of his favorite rhetorical figures)—often by linking to homoiopota at the verse endings, which allow for an especially dense accumulation of subjects and ideas.⁴⁰ Occasionally, Sgouropoulos uses Pontic words (*καρβάνιν*, Poem 3.346; *χουρχούρης*/*χουρχουρίων*, 5.106 and 124 and 6a.24); when speaking about the caravan, Sgouropoulos himself notes that it is part of a “popular proverb” (*δημῶδης λόγος*, cf. Poem 3.344).⁴¹ Yet, on both the lexical and the morphological level, these examples are the exceptions rather than the rule, and they show all the signs of a deliberate and judicious use of such linguistic features.

The same holds true for a passage in Poem 3.298–314, which is written in a pseudo-Homeric idiom.⁴² On

35 See also Nissen, *Anakreonteen*, 75–76 on Sgouropoulos.

36 On the more learned side, we find Makarios Kaloreites, John Katrares, Andronikos Palaiologos, Alexios Makrembolites, John Komnenos, Markos Angelos, and Manuel II Palaiologos, while the more vernacular texts in octosyllables include the Oracles of Leo, Constantine Hermoniakos's *Trojan War*, various versions of the tale of *Procholeon*, some songs in Palaiologan romances, and love songs.

37 A discussion of vernacular texts in octosyllables is included in G. Kechagioglou, *Κριτική έκδοση της Ιστορίας Πτωχολέοντος: Θέματα υστεροβυζαντινής και μεταβυζαντινής λογοτεχνίας*, *Επιστημονική Επετηρίδα της Φιλοσοφικής Σχολής του Πανεπιστημίου Θεσσαλονίκης*, Παράρτημα 22 (Thessaloniki, 1978), 202–22 (briefly on Sgouropoulos on 218).

38 Hapax legomena include *λιθομαργαροφόρος* (1.98, “bearing gems and pearls”), *ὑπερανριθμητός* (2.85, “entirely innumerable”), *σιδηρογνωμονέω* (2.238, “to be iron-minded”), *τὸ δικολόγημα* (3.139, “trial”), *τὸ πρακτόρημα* (3.140, “tax collection”), *ἀξινόθυτος* (5.104, “slaughtered with an axe”), and *ὁ σκοτοδύτης* (5.109, “one diving into darkness”).

39 I thank Andreas Rhoby, who suggested this interpretation of the form to me.

40 Examples of long parallelisms are numerous; see, for an especially telling example, Poem 3.136–144: *καὶ καταργουμένων πάντων / τῶν βιωτικῶν καμάτων / καὶ τῶν φορολογημάτων / καὶ τῶν δικολογημάτων / καὶ τῶν νῦν πρακτορημάτων / στρατοπέδων λυομένων / καὶ πολέμων ἀπρακτούντων / καὶ στοιχείων τῶν τεσσάρων / καὶ φωστήρων τῶν μεγάλων*; for similar passages, see, among others, Poem 1.173–82; 2.50–54; 2.167–73; 4.94–98; 6a.7–18.

41 On *χουρχουρίων*/*χουρχούρης*, Papadopoulou, *Ιστορικὸν λέξικον τῆς Ποντικῆς διαλέκτου*, 1066–67 (ed. *χουρχούριν* Papatheodorides, but see also f. 469v with the reading *χουρχούρην* in Poem 6.24).

42 *Εἰ γὰρ ἔσχον εὐνομίαν / καὶ τὴν δικαιοκρίσιαν / στάθμια, ζυγὰ καὶ μέτρα / πλήρη δικαιοδοσίας, / οὐ προέβη ταῦτα τοῦτοις, / ἄορ ὦρτο δὲ καὶ σθένος / ταναὸν ἀριπρεπέων / ἐν χειρὶ τουτέων πάγχυ / ἀλιτρῶν ἐθνέων κάτα, / κύδεα τῇ κόρσῃ νέμων / ὀρεγνὺς ἐλεητύδα / νωλεμέως διαρκέα. / Οὐνεκα γὰρ ἀτρεκίης / βασιλῆος εὐεργέος / ἔρσην ὕσω πολίεθρον / ἀπ' Οὐλύμποιο καρήνων / καὶ τοὺς ἐρεβόθεν λίαν / ἔρποντας ἐπ' ἐξωλεία / περιεσσαμένους κνέφας / τῆλε πρὸς κευθμῶνας ῥίξω / τοῦ ζοφέοντος αἰδοῦ / ὡς παμπήδην οὐλομένους* (vv. 3.293–314, “For if [emperors] held the rule of law and justice as their scales and balance and measure, then such things [as described in the above] would not happen to them, but then sword and tall strength, [held] in the hands of these very illustrious [emperors], would rush against the wicked nations and crown their heads with glory, lending them [divine]

the level of morphology, we find phenomena such as uncontracted forms (e.g., διαρκέα instead of διαρκῆ); the Aeolic genitive on -οιο and the metrical lengthening ο to ου as in Οὐλύμπιοι; or the genitive without quantitative metathesis (e.g., βασιλῆος). The lexicon too is affected by the epic language (e.g., the epic words τὸ ἄορ or τὸ κάρηνον).⁴³ However, Sgouropoulos does not refer to specific lines from Homer or other epic texts, but he uses the linguistic register to convey his message.⁴⁴ This observation is further corroborated by two other linguistic peculiarities featuring in the pseudo-Homeric passage in Poem 3, as it is supplemented, for instance, with a rare Euripidean word (ἐρεβόθεν, v. 308; cf. *Orestes* 177) and the vernacular form ῥίξω (from ῥίχνω, v. 312). Sgouropoulos does not intend to play with specific hypotexts here, but rather to employ a startlingly eclectic style.

Apart from this engagement with stylistic registers, Sgouropoulos makes ample use of references to canonical texts. At times, he faithfully versifies a hypotext, changing as little as possible to fulfil the requirements of the octosyllable. Poem 1.5–12, for instance, is built on Gregory of Nazianzos's funeral oration for Basil the Great, while Poem 5.14–21 is based on the account of the deacon Philip and the Ethiopian queen

mercy constantly and unceasingly. It is because of the righteousness of the beneficent emperor that I [God] shall pour dew over his venerable <head> from the mountain tops of Olympus and that I shall cast the lions that come stealthily from hell for our perdition, clad in darkness, from far into the vaults of murky Hades as they are entirely wicked"). There are several problems with the text: v. 3.299 ed. *ταναῶν*, but read with the manuscript *ταναῶν*; v. 305 ms. *οὐνεκα*, corr. with the edition to *οὐνεκα*; v. 3.307 ed. *ὕσσωπολιόθεν*, corr. to *ὕσω πολιόθεν*; vv. 3.308–9 ed. in reversed order, but read with the manuscript as quoted above; v. 311 ms. *κναῖφας*, but corr. with the edition to *κνέφας*; v. 3.312 ed. *ῥήξω*, but corr. to *ῥίξω*; v. 314 ms. *παμπιθην*, but corr. with the edition to *παμπήδην*. The problems prove that the text was in fact easy to understand by neither the scribe (who generally offers a clean text, but makes various orthographical mistakes), nor by the editor Papatheodorides. Thanks to Marc Lauxtermann for his help with this passage.

43 Aristophanes, too, may have left traces on Sgouropoulos's lexicon, as suggested by the word ἡ σισύρα in Poem 3.198 (cf. *Clouds* 10 etc.), but this does not compare to the Homericizing passage. I thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out this lexical choice.

44 There are hardly any direct borrowings from Homer. An exception is ἀπ' Οὐλύμπιοι καρήνων, but this is reminiscent of a formulaic verse found several times in Homer (*Iliad* 1.44, 2.167, 4.74, 7.19, 22.187, 24.121; *Odyssey* 1.102, 24.488) and not a deliberate allusion to a specific passage.

Kandake as told in Acts 8:27–39.⁴⁵ However, general references to biblical language and imagery are much more frequent,⁴⁶ while, in other contexts, Sgouropoulos refers explicitly to specific biblical authors, books, or texts, as well as to figures from classical antiquity, without necessarily referring to a specific passage in the text.⁴⁷

In summary, the composition and full understanding of Sgouropoulos's verses require a profound education in terms of both linguistics and literary knowledge. His poems thus offer us a glimpse into the level of literary learning in Trebizond. Even if we can be sure that there were many fewer manuscripts available in the Pontos than in Constantinople, linguistic training must still have been possible, as indicated by an extant *Iliad* manuscript from the library of Constantine Loukites (d. probably before 1349), a predecessor of Sgouropoulos in the office of protonotarios.⁴⁸ Overall, Sgouropoulos's linguistic, metrical, and rhetorical

45 Gregory, *Oration* 43, 37.19–21 (J. Bernardi, ed., *Gregoire de Nazianze: Discours* 4243, SC 384 [Paris, 1992]); see also K. Kubina in *Epistolary Poetry in Byzantium and Beyond: An Anthology with Critical Essays*, ed. K. Kubina and A. Riehle (New York, 2021), 351: Sgouropoulos: ἔστι γὰρ καὶ ταῦτα λόγος / παλαιῶν ἀνδρῶν πανσόφων, / ὅτι πόνος ἑξαπίνης / πρόξενός ἐστιν ὑγείας / καὶ πηδᾶ πολλάκις γῆρας / πνεύματι χρυσθέν τῷ θεῷ, / καὶ συμβολικῶς ἐγείρει / καὶ νεκρούς ἢ προθυμία. Gregory: Τοῦτο προσκείσθω τοῖς παλαιοῖς διηγήμασιν, ὅτι πόνος ὑγείαν χαρίζειται, καὶ προθυμία νεκρούς ἀνίστησι, καὶ πηδᾶ γῆρας χρυσθέν τῷ Πνεύματι. For Philip, cf. Acts 8:27: βασιλίσσης Αἰθιοπῶν . . . ὃς ἦν ἐπὶ πάσης τῆς γᾶς αὐτῆς. Sgouropoulos 5.20–21: ὁ ἐπὶ τῆς γᾶς πάσης / βασιλίσσης Αἰθιοπῶν. Acts 8:36: ἰδοὺ ὕδωρ, τί κωλύει με βαπτισθῆναι; Sgouropoulos 5.23, 26 and 28: ἰδοὺ ὕδωρ, ἰδοὺ μάνα / . . . / τί κωλύει με δεψῶντα / . . . / κἂν τοῖς ρείθροις βαπτισθῆναι; Acts 8:38: κατέβησαν ἀμφοτέροις εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ. Sgouropoulos 5.38–39: ἵνα καταβῶμεν ἀμφῶ / πρὸς τὸ ὕδωρ, πρὸς τὸ ρεῦμα. Acts 8:39: πνεῦμα κυρίου ἤρπασεν τὸν Φίλιππον. Sgouropoulos 5.46–47: κἂν τὸν Φίλιππον ἀρπάσῃ / πνεῦμα θεῖον ἐν αἰθέρι.

46 Cf., for instance, in Poem 1: vv. 1.76–80 (Ps. 126:1); 1.81–86 (Prov. 22:1); 1.172 (1 Chron. 29:17, Ws 1:1, Col. 3:22); 1.276 (Col. 4:6).

47 For biblical references, cf., e.g., Poem 1.81 (Solomon); 1.161–63 (Psalm 30 and David); 2.80 (David); 2.114 (Solomon); 4.65 (Moses); 4.72 (Deuteronomy, Ten Commandments); 5.108 (Moses's dietary rules); 5.211 (Paul); 6a.25 (Moses's dietary rules). As to classical figures, cf., e.g., 1.87–91 and 5.188–89 (Alexander the Great); 3.21 (Sirens); and 3.313 (Hades).

48 On Loukites' life, see Stefec, "Grabrede," 200–206. Three codices of his library are extant: Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, I 58 sup. (*Iliad*); Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ottob. gr. 211 (Thucydides, Dionysius of Halicarnassus); and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 2154 (Galen); see Stefec, "Aspekte," 215. From a letter of Theodore Hyrtakenos we know that Loukites, to complete his library, asked his former teacher for a manuscript of the *Odyssey*; see Letter 56.44–54 (A. Karpozilos and G. Fatouros, ed., *The Letters*

choices clearly mark him as a learned author who would expect his intended audience to understand highbrow literature and to appreciate his playfulness with the language register.

Praise, Abuse, and Advice

Following the information in the rubric that Sgouropoulos's poems are "encomiastic verses," most scholars have classified them as laudatory texts. This is a serious misinterpretation: their main focus is in fact paraenetic, although they contain—as paraenetic texts usually do—laudatory as well as critical passages. What makes them unique is their often defamatory character and the overt verbal abuse of the emperor. A review of these poems shows how these elements are entangled and bear witness to Sgouropoulos's evolving relationship with Alexios. Finally, the volatile character of the genre necessitates a broader discussion of their place in Byzantine literary history.

The Poet and His Emperor: Little Love and Much Rancor

Poem 1 is the first that Sgouropoulos addressed to the emperor, most likely soon after his coronation in 1349.⁴⁹ The poet sent it as a letter in verse from Trebizond to Kerasous, where the emperor must have been at the time, a conclusion based not only on the spatial distance referred to in the poem (see vv. 1.259–66), but also on his reference to his words being written down (v. 1.30) and that his greetings could only reach him remotely (vv. 1.23–29). In the first section, Sgouropoulos lays out his affection for the emperor and expresses his desire to speak to him (vv. 1–32). As a *captatio benevolentiae*, Sgouropoulos uses the description of an imaginary *proskynesis* before the emperor, touching his knees and kissing his feet and hands (vv. 1.23–29), a verbal manifestation of one of the central gestures of obeisance in Byzantine court protocol.⁵⁰ He goes on to say that he now daringly addresses the emperor, using the word

τολμηρῶς (v. 1.31) to describe his audacity, as is common in poems to the emperor, often in connection with a plea.⁵¹ While this makes for a decent beginning to a poem addressed to a new emperor, the main section is devoid of encomiastic elements, rather focusing on advising the emperor on how to be a virtuous ruler, and more specifically how he should act with regard to the recaptured city of Kerasous (vv. 32–258). Aside from boilerplate exhortation, such as the recommendation to strive for imperial virtue, the poem stands out for its lengthy counsel concerning the politics of the day. Having acknowledged Alexios's achievement, Sgouropoulos directs the emperor's mind toward securing his hold on power. At first he admonishes the emperor to scorn lucre and luxury, just before setting a little barb into his side with the following:

ἀλλ' οὐκ ἔχεις οὐδὲ λίθους
οὐδὲ τάλαντα χρυσίου
οὐδὲ φάρεα ποικίλα,
τοὺς βασιλικοὺς μανδύας·
οἶδα γάρ, κἂν σιωπήσῃς. (vv. 1.122–26)

But you do not have gems nor talents of gold
nor [those] colorful mantles, the imperial
cloaks—I know this, even if you keep it quiet.

In the light of the idealized disdain of wealth, this description of the poverty of Alexios (at least by imperial standards) might seem positive; but it does not make for a flattering picture of a young emperor without even a mandyas, the garment which an emperor in Constantinople at this time would wear at his coronation.⁵² Sgouropoulos's trenchant remark about his finances segues into some concrete advice: while urging the emperor to fortify the city of Kerasous,

of Theodoros Hyrtakenos: *Greek Text, Translation, and Commentary* [Athens, 2017], 220).

49 For a full translation and commentary of Poem 1, see Kubina and Riehle, *Epistolary Poetry*, 236–51 and 350–55.

50 See R. Macrides, J. Munitiz, and D. Angelov, *Pseudo-Kodinos and the Constantinopolitan Court: Offices and Ceremonies*, BBOS 15 (Farnham, UK, 2013), 386–87.

51 See R. Macrides, "The Ritual of Petition," in *Greek Ritual Poetics*, ed. D. Yatromanolakis and P. Roilos, Hellenic Studies Series 3 (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 356–70, at 364–65.

52 See M. G. Parani, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images: Byzantine Material Culture and Religious Iconography (11th to 15th Centuries)*, The Medieval Mediterranean 41 (Leiden, 2003), 15–16, and Macrides, Munitiz, and Angelov, *Ps.-Kodinos*, 229, n. 661. However, nothing is known about the imperial garment used at the coronation of an emperor in Trebizond (in general on imperial portraits in Trebizond, see T. Bardashova, "Imperial Portraits of the Grand Komnenoi of Trebizond [1204–1461]," in *Late Byzantium Reconsidered: The Arts of the Palaiologan Era in the Mediterranean*, ed. A. Mattiello and M. A. Rossi [London, 2019], 207–16).

Sgouropoulos tells Alexios not to fear indebtedness, for in the case of failure the debts would be waived. Sgouropoulos hereby refers to maritime loans, on which repayment was not required in the case of shipwreck or piracy, with the lenders bearing the losses.⁵³ However, Sgouropoulos expects that Alexios would be unable to act on his advice, as he would not find willing creditors (v. 1.150–51: εἰ δὲ δάνειον οὐχ εὖρης—/ οἶδα γὰρ ὡς οὐχ εὐρήσεις / . . . [“But if you do not obtain a loan—and I know that you will not obtain any . . .”]). In effect, Sgouropoulos hints at not only Alexios’s impecuniousness, but also his poor financial credit. Hence, the only remaining option for the emperor would be to plead with the wealthy for money, using the services of his shorthand-writing notaries (vv. 1.152–58). Sgouropoulos thus recommends the service of the notarioi of the chancery, which he had headed at some unknown point.⁵⁴ If he did so when the poem was written, the passage should be read as a piece of self-advertisement, stressing how important and useful the protonotarios would prove for the emperor. Slightly mitigating his daring critique, only a few verses later the poet gives his words a more playful aspect: βασιλεῦ, ἀστεῖα ταῦτα, / πλὴν τῆς ἀληθείας ἔνδον (vv. 1.166–67, “Emperor, these words are said in sport, but contain a kernel of truth”), thus referring to the concept of *asteiotes*, playfulness or learned wit.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, he paints the portrait of a remarkably weak emperor, reflecting the lack of political stability in contemporary Trebizond.

The rest of the poem is a detailed description of what Alexios should do if he wants to become a renowned, godly, and virtuous emperor: he should fortify the citadel of Kerasous, which was originally founded by an unnamed *megas logothetes* (vv. 1.184–92).

53 Such maritime loans had been granted since antiquity and are known in Byzantium, e.g., from the Rhodian Maritime Code (see D. G. Letsios, *Nóμος Ῥοδίων Ναυτικός: Das Seegesetz der Rhodier: Untersuchungen zu Seerecht und Handelsschiffahrt in Byzanz, Δημοσιεύματα ναυτικοῦ δικαίου* 1 [Rhodes, 1996], and, on the later period, G. Makris, *Studien zur spätbyzantinischen Schiffahrt*, Collana storica di fonti e studi 52 [Genoa, 1988], 272–74, with a translation of Sgouropoulos 1.133–57, at 295).

54 On notaries in Trebizond, see Stefec, “Grabrede,” 224–25 with nn. 72–73.

55 On the meaning of *asteiotes*, see K. Beyer and M. Grünbart, “Urbanitas und ἀστεότης. Kulturelle Ausdrucksformen von Status (10.–15. Jahrhundert): Einführung in die Tagungsthematik,” *FS* 45 (2012): 169–80 and F. Bernard, “*Asteiotes* and the Ideal of the Urbane Intellectual in the Byzantine Eleventh Century,” *FS* 47 (2013): 129–42.

This would do great good for the city, and along with Alexios’s (envisaged) foundation of charitable institutions, would ensure the latter a residence in Eden, bearing the following inscription: Ἀλεξίου βασιλέως / αἰωνία μονὴ αὕτη, / ἀντὶ τοῦ πρὸς Κερασοῦντα / πολισθέντος πολιχνίου (vv. 1.255–58, “This is the emperor Alexios’s eternal abode granted for the fort he built at Kerasous”).⁵⁶ This inscription transposes the Byzantine habit of honoring donors in epigrams inscribed on buildings to the celestial spheres, where God himself honors Alexios (no scant reward for a human being).

At the end of the poem, Sgouropoulos adds his hope that the emperor would return soon to see him and extends his best wishes (vv. 1.259–99). While his closing sentiments conform to the expectations a reader would have of a text directed to the emperor, explicit praise is notably stingy even in this final passage, reduced to a smattering of epithets such as “sun” or “morning-star” (1.260–61), or “giver of light” (cf. 1.269–70: φωτοδότα, φωτοβόλε, / φωτοπάροχε λυχνίτα). Of course, being only eleven at the time of his coronation, Alexios had not yet had the chance to amass the successes for which he could have been praised under the classic encomiastic categorization of deeds (πράξεις). However, Byzantine rhetoricians knew well how to deal with the situation: the panegyrist could describe the childhood virtues of the *laudandus*, foreshadowing great future achievement, and praise his origin (γένος).⁵⁷ Nothing of this sort appears in Poem 1. On the other hand, Sgouropoulos does include more extensive praise of someone said to possess “sound knowledge, profound prudence, a sharp mind, and a seasoned understanding”: an unnamed *megas primmikerios*, counselor to the emperor, who presumably was acting as a kind of guardian for the boy emperor.⁵⁸ That he receives more praise than the emperor is implicitly uncomplimentary

56 For the meaning “fort” for πολιχνιον in Byzantine sources, see, for instance, K. Belke, *Bithynien und Hellespont*, TIB 13 (Vienna, 2020), 572.

57 For a theoretical discussion of this technique, see, in the context of the birthday speech, Menander Rhetor, *On Epideictic Speeches* 160.23–35 (D. A. Russell and N. G. Wilson, eds., *Menander Rhetor* [Oxford, 1981], 160).

58 See vv. 1.271–76: [Alexios,] ἔχων σύμβουλον ἐν πᾶσι / πριμμικῆριον τὸν μέγαν, / ὑγιαίνοντα τὴν γνώσιν, / βαθυγνώμονα τὰς φρένας / καὶ τὸν νοῦν πεπυκνωμένον / καὶ τὸν λόγον ἡρτυμένον. Unfortunately, it is not possible to identify him.

for the latter, and it also suggests that he, rather than the child Alexios, was the actual addressee of this poem.

In summary, Poem 1 stands out for the detailed advice on contemporary events expressed by the author. While the moral exhortation contained therein is merely of a general, abstract character, conforming to the conventions of paraenetic texts, Sgouropoulos calls Alexios to action in a most specific and substantive manner. In this way, the poem's content is representative of a trend in late Byzantine panegyric, which became much more concrete than its antecedents in regards to contemporary historical matters.⁵⁹ At the same time, the almost complete lack of praise directed to the emperor, together with the remarks on his weak social and financial position, clearly set this poem apart from other poems or orations addressed to the ruler.

Yet more striking is the almost complete lack of praise in Poem 2, where we find three encomiastic verses out of a total of 438 octosyllables.⁶⁰ Even for a text with a paraenetic focus, this is remarkable, as exhortation and praise usually go hand in hand. Similarly to Poem 1, the text starts with a captatio benevolentiae describing the poet's passion for Alexios, which urged him to compose this long poem for his edification (vv. 2.1–28). At the beginning, Sgouropoulos comments on, and apologizes for, his repeated addresses to the emperor:

ἐνοχλοῦμεν, στεφηφόρε,
συνεχεῖς τὰς ὑπομνήσεις
ἐπιφέροντες εἰς πλάτος·
πλήθος γὰρ καὶ κόρος λόγου
ἀκοαῖς πολέμιός τις,
ἀλλὰ μάθε τὴν αἰτίαν,
ἵνα δώσης τὴν συγγνώμην. (vv. 2.1–7)

We annoy you, crown-wearer, continuously bringing up copious reminders—for mass and surfeit of words is hostile to the ear. But learn the reason for it, so that you forgive me.

59 On this trend, see D. Angelov, "Byzantine Imperial Panegyric as Advice Literature (1204–c. 1350)," in *Rhetoric in Byzantium: Papers from the Thirty-fifth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Exeter College, University of Oxford, March 2001*, ed. E. Jeffreys, SPBS 11 (Aldershot, UK, 2003), 55–72, at 58–70.

60 Cf. vv. 2.426–29: οὕτω, τοίνυν, δέσποτά μου, / κοσμοπόθητε γεννάδα / ἄγαν κατηγλαϊσμένε / καὶ πολλὰ λελαμπρυσμένε.

This opening suggests that the emperor had not heeded Sgouropoulos's previous counsel and needed—in the author's opinion—further guidance. At the same time, the humility topos is a way of defending the parrhesia, the freedom of speech necessary for advice, which in its very essence can be seen as critical since it implies that the addressee could improve his conduct.⁶¹ This is further described in the following verses:

πάλιν γὰρ ὁ ζήλος τρέχων
ἔρχεται πρὸς εἰσηγήσεις
ἠθικάς τε παραινέσεις
καὶ σπουδάζει παραστήσαι
τὸ διάφορον καὶ μέσον
βασιλέως πρὸς τὸν δοῦλον,
ἄρχοντος πρὸς ἀρχομένους
καὶ δεσπότης πρὸς τὸν δῆμον. (vv. 2.20–27)

Again, zeal rushes and goes forward to instruction and ethical exhortation, and is eager to present the difference and distinction between an emperor and a slave, a ruler and the ruled, and a lord and the people.

Indeed, most of this poem is dedicated to an exposition of the imperial virtues, offering the promised "instruction and ethical exhortation [*parainesis*]." Sgouropoulos also names the guiding theme of his exhortations, namely the illumination of the difference between the emperor and his subjects. Clearly these are paraenetic verses.

Exhortations dominate the central part of the poem (vv. 2.29–411); their content is familiar from texts about kingship or so-called mirrors of princes.⁶² Sgouropoulos frequently repeats that it is of utmost importance to understand the essential difference between an emperor and his subjects. He contrasts the noble lion, king of the animal world, with the base monkey, and admonishes the emperor to be as strong as lions and eagles.⁶³ Only through inner virtue will Alexios

61 See B. Beer, "Parrhesia," *RAC* 26 (2014): 1014–33.

62 This term is problematic as a genre name; see below, n. 117.

63 For lions and monkeys, see 1.114–21 and 5.144–58; for lions and eagles, 5.159–87. See also 3.230–52, where Sgouropoulos declares that the earthly kings resemble lions that do not roar and eagles without plumage. On the lion and the eagle as standard emblems of imperial power, see T. Schmidt, *Politische Tierbildlichkeit in Byzanz: Vom späten 11. bis zum beginnenden 13. Jahrhundert*, Mainzer Veröffentlichungen zur Byzantinistik 16 (Wiesbaden, 2020), 75–163. The comparison

truly be a (legitimate) emperor, otherwise he will have the name of an (illegitimate) “tyrant” (τύραννος ψευδώνυμος, v. 2.68). The poet continues with the folowing admonitions: The emperor should be pious, God-loving, and an imitator of Christ as well as of the kings David and Solomon.⁶⁴ He should furthermore disdain earthly wealth,⁶⁵ refrain from being haughty,⁶⁶ show steadfastness and sympathy,⁶⁷ be ever wakeful,⁶⁸ acquire learning and honor the literati,⁶⁹ be merciful and generous,⁷⁰ et cetera. Sgouropoulos then ponders morality by comparing three gems (ἀδάμας “diamond,” μάγνης “magnet,” and λίθος λυδία “Lydian stone,” used to assay gold, vv. 2.155–59) with the qualities an emperor should possess. He continues on with an ekphrasis of the emperor’s body,⁷¹ but instead of describing the imperial body in its (moral) beauty, Sgouropoulos paints an ideal image. The emperor *should* have a mouth such as Christ’s, his hands *should* be ready to give mercy, his feet *should* equal those of the apostles hurrying on the pious roads of peace, et cetera.⁷² These are references which all recur prominently in the paraenetic and encomiastic texts of the age. However, in some cases we find references to a more specific piece of advice related to Sgouropoulos’s personal situation, indicating that he may have been under pressure with his position at court in question. He warns the emperor against heeding false counselors (vv. 2.238–42 and 2.361–67) and urges him to justly assign the court offices (vv. 2.290–300), which

leads one to suspect that Sgouropoulos had been losing favor and influence at court.

The poet concludes Poem 2 by returning to the pronouncements at its beginning, now reflecting explicitly on the difficulties that come with regularly advising an emperor at such length:

Ἐχει τις εἰπεῖν ἐνταῦθα
πρὸς ἡμᾶς τοὺς στιχοπλόκους,
ὅτι ληρωδοῦμεν⁷³ ἴσως,
βασιλέα στεφεφόρον
θεοδίδακτον ἐν πᾶσιν
διασεύοντες τοῖς λόγοις
καὶ τὰς ἀκοὰς τοῖς στίχοις
πλήττοντες σὺν ἀκαρπία,
πλὴν ἐρούμεν καὶ πρὸς τοῦτον,
ὅτι τὰ μεγάλα ταῦτα
καὶ εὐρύχωρα πελάγη
δέχονται καὶ τοὺς χειμάρρους
καὶ πηγὰς μικρὰς ὑδάτων
ἀστενοχωρήτως πάνυ. (vv. 2.412–25)

Somebody might say to us, the weavers of these verses, that we talk frivolously, as we are confounding the crown-bearing emperor, in all respects taught by God, with our words, and we are striking his ears with our verses in vain. But we would say to this person that also the grand and wide sea receives rivers and small springs of water without discrimination.

This is a humility topos well-known from texts addressed by an inferior to his master. Sgouropoulos furthermore refers to himself as a στιχοπλόκος (“weaver of verses,” “versifier”), a rare term with a colloquial connotation and used as a way of ridiculing or humiliating a bad poet.⁷⁴ He thus seasons his advice with a pinch of

between the honorable lion and the base monkey is also proverbial, see LSJ s.v. πίθηκος 1.3.

64 See, on the difference between the emperor and his subjects, 2.41–62; on David, 2.80–113; on Solomon, 2.114–48 and 1.81–86. On the emperor as an imitator of God, see D. Angelov, *Imperial Ideology and Political Thought in Byzantium (1204–1330)* (Cambridge, 2006), 191, and H. Hunger, *Prooimion: Elemente der byzantinischen Kaiseridee in den Arengen der Urkunden*, WByzSt 1 (Vienna, 1964), 58–63.

65 See 2.117–48; see also 1.92–121.

66 See 2.160–83.

67 See 2.305–22.

68 See 2.336. See also Hunger, *Prooimion*, 94–100.

69 See 2.352–67; see also 5.73–90.

70 See 2.368–87 and 3.241–52. See Hunger, *Prooimion*, 137–53.

71 See, for instance, on Manuel Philes, K. Kubina, *Die enkomiasische Dichtung des Manuel Philes: Form und Funktion des literarischen Lobes in der frühen Palaiologenzeit*, BA 38 (Berlin, 2020), 104–7.

72 See 2.341–42: ἔστω γοῦν Χριστοῦ τὸ στόμα / τὸ τοῦ βασιλέως στόμα; on the hands, 2.368–87; on the feet, 2.388–402.

73 Papatheodorides, “Ἀνέκδοτοι στίχοι,” 270, following the manuscript ληρωδοῦμεν.

74 A passage in Thomas Magistros’s *Ecloga* proves the colloquial nature of the term, as he advises the reader striving for an Atticist style to use ἱάμβων ἐργάτης (“producer of iambs”) rather than στιχοπλόκος to describe a poet: Magistros, *Ecloga* 189.16–17 (F. Ritschl, ed., *Thomae magistri sive Theoduli monachi ecloga vocum atticarum* [Halle, 1832]). The so-called Horoscope of Trebizond corroborates this, as it speaks about poetry (στιχοπλοκία) in Trebizond performed by mimes (παιγνιώται) for the people (ἄνθρωποι) (see S. Lampros, “Τραπεζουντιακὸν ὠροσκόπιον τοῦ ἔτους 1336,” *Νέας Ἑλλ.* 13 [1916]:

self-ironic humility to improve the chance of a favorable reception by the emperor.

This humility has vanished in Poem 3. What he alluded to in Poem 2, his loss of favor and influence, seems now to have been fully realized. Sgouropoulos first sets out his *causa scribendi* by referring to the topos of the swan song; like the bird who sings a song before death, so is he close to death and hence emits his poem (vv. 3.1–30). While the swan song motif is well-known even to the present day, the image of the suffering poet, who addresses his patron with his last breath, was familiar in Byzantine poetic laments of intellectuals, and poets in particular, deploring the futility of their poetic pursuits.⁷⁵ What follows, however, is unparalleled in its vitriol: the central part of the poem combines a description of the imperial virtues and the recounting of the prerequisites for finding salvation in the eternal life with a fierce condemnation of the emperor for possessing none of these qualities (vv. 3.31–317), with general statements continuously interwoven with personal remarks by the poet. At the beginning of this passage, Sgouropoulos refers to a surfeit of words which one should avoid, this time without modesty, but with fierce accusations: ἴσως ἔξεις τότε κόρον / τῶν ἐμῶν δυστυχημάτων, / λήψομαι ἀγὼν δὲ τέλος, / φεῦ, τῶν σὼν ἀδικημάτων (“maybe you will then grow weary of my misfortunes, and I will be rid, at last, of your injustice!,” vv. 3.35–38). While this is already overtly

confrontational, the poem’s tone becomes yet more enraged and abusive. Sgouropoulos expounds in great detail on how all men are equal before God and how often poor men are saved for their virtue while rich men are condemned. He intersperses these thoughts with comments on how he rejoices in these ideas:

τοῦτο παρηγόρημά μου,
τοῦτο ψυχαγωγία μου,
τοῦτο παραμύθιά μου,
τοῦτο στέφανός μοι δόξης
τοῦτό μοι λαμπρὰ τιάρα,
ὅτι βασιλεὺς οὐκ ἔστι
κατ’ ἐκείνον τὸν αἰῶνα
ὁ τὸ δίκαιον ἐκτρίβων,
ὁ καταπατῶν ὡς κόνιν
τοὺς τῆς ἀληθείας λόγους. (vv. 3.97–106)

This is my comfort, this is my solace, this is my consolation, this is my crown of glory, this is my shining tiara, that he, who wipes out what is just, who tramples upon words of truth as if they were dust, will then be emperor no more.

Sgouropoulos explains the changed tone of this poem: Καὶ λοιπὸν ὁ λόγος ἤκει / τὸ ποθούμενον ἐκφράσαι, / ἀφοβίας γενομένης / καὶ δειλίας αἰρομένης (vv. 3.176–79: “And now the discourse comes to recount what I desire, as there is no more fear, and cowardice has disappeared”). This statement again refers to the concept of parrhesia, based on the poet’s freedom of fear, by letting go of all restraint toward the emperor. The author seems to have lost all hope that Alexios would ever accede to his exhortations, and so dares to speak frankly henceforth. In Poem 3, Sgouropoulos does not offer paraenesis, but rather harsh condemnations of the emperor’s ignoble behavior interwoven with statements on how a true emperor should behave. He goes on to depict a scene at the heavenly court, where he will become a “savagely leaping beast, a teeth-gnashing wolf” (θῆρ ἀλλόμενος ἀγρίως, / λύκος τοὺς ὀδόντας βρύχων, vv. 3.184–85) and convince the angels and the Lord that the emperor had demeaned him by denying him well-deserved gifts, such as a cloak or a horse, as well as honor as a man of letters.⁷⁶ The scene gets

33–50, at 40.25–26: Τοῖς παιγνιώταις χαρὰν καὶ κέρδος, καὶ ἐκβάλωσιν νέας στιχοπλοκίας [“To the mimes joy and profit, and the publication of new poems”]]. Here, one would think of popular songs in the vernacular (see G. Spyridakes, “Ποιηταὶ δημῶδων ᾠσμάτων εἰς Τραπεζοῦντα κατὰ τὸν ΙΔ’ αἰῶνα,” *Arch.Πόντ.* 16 [1951]: 263–66). Furthermore, an anonymous author uses its derivative στιχοπλοκέω ironically as a pejorative term in a verse letter to a monk writing poor verses: Ps.-Psellos 68.47 (L. G. Westerink, ed., *Michaelis Pselli poemata*, Teubner [Stuttgart, 1992], 451–55); on these poems, see W. Hörandner and A. Paul, “Zu Ps.-Psellos, Gedichte 67 (Ad monachum superbum) und 68 (Ad eundem),” *Medioevo Greco* 11 (2011): 107–38; and F. Bernard in Kubina and Riehle, *Epistolary Poetry*, 329–32.

75 Famous examples of such laments include poems by Theodore Prodromos (both in his learned poetry and in the Ptochoprodromika), Manganeios Prodromos, Michael Haplouchair, and Manuel Philes. See, among others, R. Beaton, “The Rhetoric of Poverty: The Lives and Opinions of Theodore Prodromos,” *BMGS* 11 (1987): 1–28; A. Dyck, “Ptochoprodromos: *Ἀνάθεμαν τα γράμματα* and Related Texts,” *ByzF* 15 (1990): 45–52; E. Bourboulakis, “Political Personae: The Poem from Prison by Michael Glykas. Byzantine Literature between Fact and Fiction,” *BMGS* 31 (2007): 53–75; Kubina, *Die enkomiasische Dichtung*, 195–98.

76 The passage is quoted at the beginning of this paper.

even more provocative when Sgouropoulos recounts the Lord's words in the first person (vv. 3.231–314), which teach imperial virtues and make it very clear that emperors will be judged according to their ethical behavior, whereas imperial insignia will perish in the latter days. Just as remarkable as this direct speech by God is Sgouropoulos's sudden switch to a rather obscure pseudo-Homeric idiom with a rare Euripidean inlay and a vernacular verbal form (vv. 3.298–314; see also above). The passage starts with a reference to Leviticus 19:35–36 (cf. v. 3.295), the source of a common expression to denote justice, only to switch to pagan imagery. Sgouropoulos argues that if kings are just, they will find eternal mercy and receive dew from Olympus's mountain top, whereas the Lord will cast the wicked into Hades. As the verses do not refer to any specific passage in Homer or any other epic author, but rather make use of common epic vocabulary, it seems that Sgouropoulos did not wish to draw the audience's attention to the content of any possible hypotext, but to the eccentric language.

Poem 3 ends with a dose of mock humility, with Sgouropoulos presenting himself as a bowing servant and bidding the emperor for justice, lest he be judged the way he judges. In an *adynaton*, the poet states that his admonitions are as futile as counting the leaves on a tree, etc. (vv. 3.318–46). He ends with the following words, directed to the emperor: Γέλασον λοιπὸν εἰς πλάτος, / λέγε τὸν δημῶδη λόγον, / τοῦ κυνὸς καθυλακτοῦντος / τὸ καραβάνιν παροδεύει (vv. 3.343–46, "Have a good laugh, if you like, and speak the proverb 'the dogs bark, but the caravan moves on'"). In this context, the emperor's laughter is a manner of deriding Sgouropoulos, with the proverb referring to the habit of rulers of ignoring their critics and continuing on, unreformed, with their previous conduct. The saying is of oriental origin, but not found in medieval Greek, thus offering an example of how Sgouropoulos's mind was embedded in the multicultural society of Trebizond.⁷⁷

The difference between Poem 3, with its focus on abuse, and Poems 1 and 2 may well be explained by Sgouropoulos's loss of favor—a plausible scenario, as we learn from Panaretos that there was conflict and confusion at court around 1350 when several offices were

reassigned.⁷⁸ While Sgouropoulos questions the social order by challenging the emperor in Poems 1 and 2—and presumably hopes to find a position in the new political configuration—once his advice transmutes into abuse in Poem 3, this very order is confirmed. For there is no doubt in Sgouropoulos's vision of the Judgment that Alexios will appear there as an emperor; his only hope is that the fall of this unjust emperor would be effected eschatologically.⁷⁹

Poem 4 would at first glance seem to mark a strong contrast to Poem 3, as it is the first to actually praise Alexios extensively—but only if it is read superficially. Sgouropoulos recounts how the emperor's deceased father had behaved toward those visiting him (vv. 4.1–55) and reflects on how Alexios imitates and emulates his father's behavior (vv. 4.56–90), before ending with laudatory verses and gestures of obeisance, the irony of which, however, is made clear (vv. 91–122). Sgouropoulos describes Alexios's father, Basil, with epithets used commonly to refer to Zeus (cf. *τερπικέραυνος* ["delighting in thunder"] and *νεφεληγερέτης* ["cloud-gatherer"] in vv. 4.9–10),⁸⁰ emphasizing the power and extraordinary rage of the emperor. About every "just plea" (cf. *ἀναφορὰ δίκαια*, v. 4.1) heard, Sgouropoulos says, Basil would become furious. The poet would instead have approached the emperor "with hypocrisy" (v. 4.19: *σὺν ὑποκρίσει*), pretending to be bent with illness and looking wholly miserable. Falling for this fraud, Alexios's father would then have listened sympathetically from dusk to dawn and felt great pain for the author on account of his words, made up "in great pretense" (v. 4.47: *ἐν πολλῇ σκηνοποιίᾳ*). In a rather sarcastic tone, Sgouropoulos adds that pretense would sweep away all the ignorant people (*ἧτις οἶδε παρασύρειν / ἀκλεῶς τοὺς ἀνοήτους*, vv. 4.48–49), suggesting that Basil—fooled by Sgouropoulos's simulated misery—was indeed ignorant in his judgment. Thus, the author turns ostensible praise of Basil for his generosity into criticism of the latter's dull intellectual and perceptual

78 Panaretos, *Chronicle* 88.12–18 (Karpov, Shukurov, and Kryukov, *Mikhail Panaret*, 88).

79 On Byzantine perceptions and calculations of the date of the end of the world, see with further bibliography W. Brandes, "Byzantine Predictions of the End of the World in 500, 1000 and 1492 AD," in *The End(s) of the Time(s): Apocalypticism, Messianism and Utopianism through the Ages*, ed. H.-C. Lehner, *Prognostication in History* 6 (Leiden, 2021), 32–63.

80 See LSJ s.v. for references.

77 See, for example, the first printed collection of Persian proverbs from 1644 (T. Shurgaia, "The Earliest Printed Collection of Persian Proverbs," *Proverbium* 29 [2012]: 307–30, at 324).

capacities. At the same time, the Homeric epithets for Basil at the poem's beginning, seen in this light, appear as a means of ridiculing him, as the feckless emperor makes for a poor emulator of Zeus, king of the gods.

In the following section, Sgouropoulos turns to Alexios, saying that he would now also praise him, for Alexios had in every way tried to follow God's commandment, revealed to Moses, to honor father and mother (Exodus 20:12). Eager to equal his father, Alexios would leave those out in the cold whom Basil had rejected: διὰ τοῦτο περισφίγγεις / καὶ συστέλλεις τὴν παλάμην / καὶ τοὺς ἱεροὺς δακτύλους / πρὸς τοὺς ἀπευκταίους τούτῳ ("therefore you constrict and contract the palm of your hand and your holy fingers to those despised by him [i.e., your father]," vv. 4.77–80). These lines are drenched in irony, given that Sgouropoulos began by describing how his addressee's father reacted angrily against every well-founded plea. Equaling Basil thus means equaling a raving, merciless emperor who cannot tell truth from falsehood.

At the end of Poem 4 we find the first dense accumulation of encomiastic epithets in Poems 1–6a. Most of them are connected to the speaker by the use of possessive pronouns in the first person, thus enhancing the personal relationship between the author and his addressee (cf. e.g., ἔαρ τῆς ψυχῆς μου μέγα / τὸ τερπνὸν ἐντρύφημά μου ["great spring of my soul, my pleasant delight," vv. 4.93–94]). In a humility topos, Sgouropoulos asks his addressee to accept his words as those of a child, as age makes people childish (vv. 4.102–13), and ends with a verbal proskynesis to the emperor (vv. 4.114–22). While this triad of praise, a humility topos, and proskynesis would seem to make for a suitable ending to an encomiastic poem, Sgouropoulos subverts it, when he speaks about his allegedly childish words:

ὥς ψελλίσματα νηπίων
δέχου τοὺς παρόντας λόγους,
κἂν προσπταίωμεν ἐν τούτοις
σύγγνωθι τοῖς γεραϊτέροις,
νηπιῶδες γὰρ τὸ γῆρας
πρὸς τοῖς κρίνουσιν εὐλόγως
κατ' ἀντίφρασιν δικαίαν·
ὁ γὰρ νοὺς οὐ νηπιάσει⁸¹
σύντροφος τελῶν τοῖς λόγοις,

81 Papatheodorides, "Ἀνέκδοτοι στίχοι," 277, following the manuscript νηπιάσοι.

ἀλλ' οὐδέποτε πεσεῖται
κίοσιν ἀσφαλεστάτοις
ἐρειδόμενος ταῖς βίβλοις. (vv. 4.102–13)

As with the stuttering of children, accept these words, and if we make mistakes in them, excuse the elderly, for age is childish to those who judge wisely according to a just antiphrasis. For reason does not become childish when it is nurtured together with words, but it will never fall if it is planted upon the most secure pillars, the books.

The clue to this passage is the word *antiphrasis*, a rhetorical figure in which a word or expression is used to denote its opposite and which is embedded in irony.⁸² Thus, that old age makes one childish seems true not for those who judge wisely (εὐλόγως), but, according to antiphrasis, to those who do not. In fact, Sgouropoulos argues that an educated mind would under no circumstances lose its acumen. The seemingly humble and encomiastic ending of the poem is thus inverted in an ironic twist, and the hyperbolic praise is revealed as a deception. The passage is exceptional: although the use of irony was an important critical tool in Byzantine rhetoric, it was rarely used as boldly and explicitly as it is here.⁸³

The opening section of Poem 5 (vv. 5.1–13) surprises with his address to the emperor as John (v. 5.10). It starts with some typical laudatory epithets, including the designation χαριώνυμος ("with the name of grace," v. 5.3) alluding to the Hebrew meaning of the name John ("God is gracious").⁸⁴ One would be tempted to identify this emperor as John III Megas Komnenos (1321/22–1362, r. 1342–1344) if one were not aware that Alexios III's baptismal name was John and was only changed

82 On antiphrasis, see H. Lausberg, *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik: Eine Grundlegung der Literaturwissenschaft*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart, 2008), §§586–87 and 904; G. Ueding, ed., *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, 9 vols. (Tübingen, 1992–2009), 1:713–20. Sometimes, the definition of antiphrasis overlaps with the definition of irony as "semantic inversion (saying one thing and meaning its opposite)," see E. Braounou, "Eirōn-terms in Greek Classical and Byzantine Texts: A Preliminary Analysis for Understanding Irony in Byzantium," *Millennium* 11 (2014): 289–360, at 294, with a discussion of this reductive understanding of irony at 294–97.

83 See Angelov, "Byzantine Imperial Panegyric," 70–71.

84 Cf. A. Rhoby, *Byzantinische Epigramme auf Ikonen und Objekten der Kleinkunst: Nebst Addenda zu Band I "Byzantinische Epigramme auf Fresken und Mosaiken"*, Denk Wien 408 = Veröffentlichungen zur Byzanzforschung 23 (Vienna, 2010), 90.

to Alexios at the time of his enthronement in honor of his grandfather Alexios II, whose reign was generally thought of as an age of security and prosperity.⁸⁵ Sgouropoulos is in fact stripping the emperor of his glorious imperial name, suggesting that he is merely “John,” *not* Alexios, and unworthy of his imperial namesake, thereby undermining Alexios III’s imperial standing.⁸⁶ The accumulation of encomiastic epithets (vv. 5.1–12) and the verbal proskynesis (v. 5.13) at the beginning of the poem now appear suspect in their hyperbolic character in the light of the irony displayed at the end of Poem 4 and the mischievous appellation of the emperor.

The poem then seemingly returns, at least at first, to an exclusively paraenetic mode. Sgouropoulos asks the emperor to heed him as his teacher (διδάσκαλος, cf. v. 5.36) and tells the story of Philip, one of the first seven deacons, who on a return voyage from Jerusalem, meets an unnamed servant of the Ethiopian queen Kandake and baptizes him (vv. 5.14–21; cf. Acts 8:27–39). According to hagiographical tradition, this servant (later named Kandakes in Byzantine literature) acted as a missionary in southern Arabia and Ceylon and was celebrated among the saints in the Greek Orthodox Church on 30 June each year.⁸⁷ In his poem, Sgouropoulos describes himself as Philip and asks the emperor to become the servant Kandakes. Despite the honor bestowed upon the latter as a missionary saint, this comparison is less than flattering as the servant in question was a eunuch, and he is explicitly addressed as such by Sgouropoulos (v. 5.19). Though eunuchs could hold high court positions in the early and middle Byzantine periods, for the entirety of the Byzantine era, eunuchs were unambiguously excluded from any

possibility of imperial accession.⁸⁸ Equating Alexios with a eunuch was thus a stinging insult. This is not the only audacious aspect of the comparison. For just as Philip baptized the eunuch, Sgouropoulos states, he will baptize the emperor with wisdom:

καὶ βαπτίσω σε τιμίως
βάπτισμα καινὸν καὶ ξένον
ἐν ὀνόματι ῥητόρων
ποιητῶν καὶ φιλοσόφων
τῆς κοσμολαμποῦς τριάδος. (vv. 5.41–45)

And I will baptize you with great honor in a novel and extraordinary baptism in the name of the rhetors, poets, and philosophers of the world-illuminating trinity.

He refers to the trivium of Byzantine education (grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic) and thus offers a baptism of learning—a bold image, given that the usual “triad” in the baptism would be the trinity. Yet, through his baptism, the emperor would honor the literati and show great wisdom in his knowledge—otherwise, Sgouropoulos would have to die. That Sgouropoulos just subversively referred to his addressee with his baptismal name, denying his renaming, adds a second layer of delicacy, as it seems that “John” lacks the baptism he needs (and could receive by Sgouropoulos) in order to be “Alexios.” Together with the lengthy exposition of this idea, we get the impression that Sgouropoulos was (or at least thought it would have been appropriate to be) Alexios’s teacher, while the subversive details make it clear that he was frustrated by having either lost, or even failed to attain, this position.⁸⁹

The second part of the poem is extraordinary in the acridity of its insults, but its concrete meaning is

85 Cf. Panaretos, *Chronicle* 88.4–5 (Karpov, Shukurov, and Kryukov, *Mikhail Panaret*, 88); on the change of his name, see R. Shukurov, “AIMA: The Blood of the Grand Komnenoi,” *BMGS* 19.1 (1995): 161–81, at 171–76, who, however, misinterprets Panaretos in suggesting that John’s name was already changed soon after his birth.

86 If one assumes that Alexios was co-emperor with Michael Megas Komnenos (see above, n. 20), the poem could have been addressed to the former before his renaming in 1349. This would rule out the hypothesis that the address is ironic. However, Poems 5 and 6a are intimately connected by the image of the dead owl (see below) and should be read in proximity to each other. In Poem 6a, Sgouropoulos explicitly speaks about the irony behind his verses (vv. 3 and 37: κατ’ ἀντιφράσιν), thus imposing an ironic flair on Poem 5 as well. Moreover, Poem 6a must be dated to after 28 September 1351, Alexios’s wedding, as his wife is mentioned.

87 See Synaxarium, June 27 (*Synaxarium CP*, 787.6–9).

88 See S. Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society* (Abingdon, UK, 2008), 28. Additionally, see C. Messis, *Les eunuques à Byzance*, Dossiers byzantins 14 (Paris, 2014), especially 209–37, on the image of eunuchs in literary texts. See also N. Gaul, “Eunuchs in the Late Byzantine Empire c. 1250–1400,” in *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, ed. S. Tougher (London, 2002), 199–219, with a list of late Byzantine eunuchs at 209–11.

89 Poem 6b.71–72 points in the same direction, as the author asks his addressee to honor his teacher and bestow gifts upon him. However, as argued above, it is unclear whether both the author and the addressee are the same as in Poems 1–6a, so the evidence of Sgouropoulos’s possible activity as a school master remains inconclusive.

hard to grasp. The poet states that if the emperor should see an eagle owl on his table, he should be disgusted and have it immediately sent away (vv. 5.100–120). Sgouropoulos describes the owl—presumably a metaphor for an adversary of Sgouropoulos at court—as an abominable, filthy, half-decayed creature of the dark and refers to the dietary laws of the Old Testament, where Moses prohibits the Israelites from eating certain birds, among them various kinds of owls (cf. Leviticus 11:13–19 and Deuteronomy 14:12–19). His description of this owl is vivid:

κᾶν κατίδης ἐν τραπέζῃ
τὸν μιροφάγον βοῦφον,
θνησιμαῖον δεκαταῖον,
πτῶμα μιάρων δυσῶδες,
ἀξινόθυτον σὺν πλάνῃ,
βαρυκέφαλον τὸν βούαν,
χορχορῶνα χορχορῶν,⁹⁰
τὸν ἀκάθαρτον ἐν βίβλοις
ἱεραῖς ταῖς τοῦ Μωσέως,
σκοτοδύτην, νυκτιλόχον,
τὸν ἐπίβουλον ὀρνέοις,
λαγωῖς καὶ τοῖς κνωδάλοις
καὶ τοῖς ἔρπουσιν ἐν σκότῳ
προτιθέμενον εἰς βρώσιν
ταῖς ἐξ ὄρκων ἀσφαλείαις,
ὥσπερ τι τῶν ἐδωδίων
καὶ τῶν καθαρῶν ἐκ νόμου. (vv. 5.100–116)

And if you perceive on your table the filthy-eating eagle owl, the ten day-old carcass, abominable, stinking cadaver, slaughtered with the axe and with deceit, the heavy-headed owl, the screeching screecher, a foul beast according to the holy books of Moses, diving into darkness, lurking in the night, creeping up on birds, hares, beasts, and serpents in the dark, [the owl] served up as a meal with assurances under oath that it is edible as it were, and pure according to the law.

By all means the emperor should eat the owl himself, rather than offer it to his teacher. Sgouropoulos refers not only back to the Bible, but also to a tradition of negative associations with the eagle owl. The proverb

90 Papatheodorides, “Ἀνέκδοτοι στίχοι,” 279, χορχορῶν.

“an eagle owl comes,” for instance, refers to a witless person.⁹¹ If now the emperor ate it and socialized with those loving it, neglecting his teacher, he would become one of them: abominable, dull, and wicked. The poem ends with a surprising turn toward the owl:

Γένοιτο πολλὰ κακά σοι,
βοῦφε μιάρé, νυκτάλωψ,
ὅτι κύπτειν ἀναγκάζεις
ἐν τῷ γράφειν καὶ κυρτοῦν με
γέροντα συγκεκυφότα
καὶ πρὸ τῶν ἀγώνων τούτων,
ὅτι θέλοντα τοὺς στίχους
οὐκ ἔῃς με περικόψαι,
ἀλλὰ λέγειν ἀναγκάζεις
πρὸς ἀπέραντον τὸ πλάτος. (vv. 5.218–27)

May all the worst happen to you, filthy, day-blind owl, because you force me, an old man bent over even before these contests, to bow over my writings and twist my back, because you do not allow me to be brief in my verses, as I wish, but force me to boundless loquacity.

It seems that Sgouropoulos was, or at least felt, obliged to write excessively long poems because the owl compelled him to defend his point at length. The descriptions of the owl, along with this final address, give the

91 See Ps.-Zonaras, *Lexicon*, s.v. βοῦφος: βοῦφος ἐπιφοιτᾷ, ἐπὶ τῶν ἀσυνέτων καὶ παχυφρόνων εἴρηται (J. A. H. Tittmann, ed., *Iohannis Zonarae Lexicon*, 2 vols. [Leipzig, 1808], 1:397). The *Poulologos*, a late Byzantine vernacular poem including a sequel of ferocious, acrimonious debates between various birds, contains the story that the eagle owl (μποῦφος) came from the Tatar countries, whence it had fled to the Byzantine (Rhomaian) area. When asked to guard a herd of sheep, it fell asleep and consequently lost all of his flock. Later, the owl was caught, flayed, and its skin worn on a hat as a warning to all careless, sleepy shepherds (cf. vv. 621–53, S. Krawczynski, ed., *Ὁ Πουλολόγος: Kritische Textausgabe mit Übersetzung sowie sprachlichen und sachlichen Erläuterungen*, BBA 22 [Berlin, 1960], 132–39). A similar description is found in the *Cyranides*, where it is stated that worn as an amulet, the owl's talon would protect one from blackmail: *Cyranides* 3.8 (D. Kaimakis, ed., *Die Kyraniden*, Beiträge zur Klassischen Philologie 76 [Meisenheim am Glan, 1976], 198). Stefec, “Grabrede,” 223 with n. 70, suggests that Sgouropoulos was possibly familiar with this text (with special reference to Poem 2.215–20 and *Cyranides* 1.13 [Kaimakis, *Die Kyraniden*, 73.11–13]). However, this kind of information about certain animals circulated widely and it is not necessary to suppose a direct reference, especially as no parallels in wording can be detected.

second half of Poem 5 a fiercely abusive character and all the more highlight the irony behind the praise, as well as the bitterness and anticipated futility of Sgouropoulos's exhortations.

Poem 6a, finally, makes use of literary techniques familiar from the first five poems, but its overall interpretation remains unclear as the text breaks up in the middle of a sentence, and it is impossible to know how many verses have been lost (v. 6a.50). Sgouropoulos starts with topical praise of the emperor (vv. 6a.1–18) and then returns to the description of the owl and how Alexios dealt with it (vv. 6a.19–50). At the beginning, he refers to Alexios's name and descent by addressing him in a traditional manner as Ἀγγελώνυμε καὶ Δούκα (v. 6a.1, "by the name of Angel[os] and Doukas"), even though Alexios was a member of neither the Angeloi nor the Doukai families.⁹² Just as in Poem 5, Sgouropoulos uses a seemingly laudatory appellation of the emperor as an ironic device. By ostensibly enhancing his nobility via a patently false association, he is in fact highlighting Alexios's genealogically less-exalted status.⁹³ That this is indeed ironic becomes indisputable on the evidence of the following verses: κατ' ἀντίφρασιν δικάαν / ἐπαινῶ . . . ("By means of a righteous negation I praise [you] . . .," vv. 6a.3–4, see also v. 6a.37). Again, Sgouropoulos explicitly stresses that he is using the rhetorical device of antiphrasis, expressing praise where blame is meant. He then goes on to extol the emperor's limbs, his virtues, and his wisdom, referring to well-known and widely mentioned imperial virtues. Yet the antiphrasis leaves no doubt that what he is actually suggesting is that Alexios had none of these qualities. Poem 6a then refers back to the owl, but with an even more cryptic image than in Poem 5: Sgouropoulos describes the emperor holding in his left hand a rotten and stinking carcass, condemned by Moses—in short, the very eagle owl that the author described earlier. Holding a sword with his right hand, the emperor is said to have burst out laughing, cutting the owl and swearing to God that it was no owl, and

then forcing his subjects to eat from it (vv. 6a.19–35). If for the pleasure of his wife, the empress, the emperor would force his friends to eat of this owl, Sgouropoulos again stresses that Alexios should do so first and be stained. Yet, at this point, the poem breaks off, leaving the reader in no little doubt about the interpretation of this image. The description of the eagle owl nevertheless constitutes the climax of Sgouropoulos's caustic verses and outdoes even his abuse of the emperor. This is not surprising, as it is generally safer to attack a person from the emperor's entourage than the emperor himself.⁹⁴ However, in the context of Sgouropoulos's ironic praise of Alexios, this stinging insult of the owl also reflects revilement on the emperor.

A close reading of Sgouropoulos's poems to Alexios reveals a complex entanglement of praise, abuse, and advice, dripping with irony. His poems bewilder the reader in how they resist attempts at generic classification. In order to contextualize Sgouropoulos's poems further within the history of Byzantine poetry, we shall finally have to more carefully analyze the generic conventions in these texts.

Genre and Literary Tradition

The question of genre in Byzantine literature, and particularly in poetry, is a delicate one.⁹⁵ Some genres are thoroughly described in rhetorical handbooks and

92 See also D. I. Polemis, *The Doukai: A Contribution to Byzantine Prosopography* (London, 1968), 136–37.

93 On praising qualities that the laudandus does not possess as a means of critique, see M. Mullett, "How to Criticise the Laudandus," in *Power and Subversion in Byzantium: Papers from the Forty-third Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, March 2010*, ed. D. Angelov and M. Saxby, SPBS 17 (Farnham, UK, 2013), 247–62, at 262.

94 See also P. Magdalino, "Political Satire," in *Satire in the Middle Byzantine Period: The Golden Age of Laughter?*, ed. P. Marciniak and I. Nilsson, *Explorations in Medieval Culture* 12 (Leiden, 2021), 104–26, at 117.

95 On generic classification in Byzantine studies, see the seminal study by M. Mullett, "The Madness of Genre," *DOP* 46 (1992): 233–43; P. A. Agapitos, "SO Debate: Genre, Structure, and Poetics in the Byzantine Vernacular Romances of Love," *SO* 79 (2004): 7–101; K. Kubina, "Manuel Philes—a Begging Poet? Requests, Letters, and Problems of Genre Definition," in *Middle and Late Byzantine Poetry: Texts and Contexts*, ed. A. Rhoby and N. Zagklas, *Studies in Byzantine History and Civilization* 14 (Turnhout, 2018), 147–81, at 150–56; U. Moennig, "Literary Genres and Mixture of Generic Features in Late Byzantine Fictional Writing," in *Medieval Greek Storytelling: Fictionality and Narrative in Byzantium*, ed. P. Roilos, *Mainzer Veröffentlichungen zur Byzantinistik* 12 (Wiesbaden, 2014), 163–82; P. A. Agapitos, "Ancient Models and Novel Mixtures: The Concept of Genre in Byzantine Funerary Literature from Photios to Eustathios of Thessalonike," in *Modern Greek Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. G. Nagy and A. Stavrakopoulou (New York, 2003), 5–23; P. A. Agapitos, "Grammar, Genre and Patronage in the Twelfth Century: A Scientific Paradigm and Its Implications," *JÖB* 64 (2014): 1–22.

numerous texts follow these standards closely, while at the same time adapting creatively within this tradition (a good example being the encomium in prose).⁹⁶ Other genres are not formalized, but their structure, linguistic choices, and motifs are so consistent that they can fairly be classified under one genre type, as, for instance, in the case of dedicatory epigrams.⁹⁷ Still others defy any clear generic classification, such as the poems of Ptochoprodromos.⁹⁸ One difficulty that commonly arises in these attempts is the blurry definition of what a genre actually is; while the term is used in everyday speech, and indeed fundamentally structures our understanding of literature implicitly and explicitly, there is no authoritative definition in literary studies. In the course of the following discussion, I shall treat genre as a group of texts in a temporally and culturally delineated space, in which they are related to each other by shared formal, rhetorical, thematic, and functional features. Various genres can overlap, and clear-cut boundaries between genres cannot be established, but depending on their dominant features, texts can be more or less proximate to the genre's core.⁹⁹ Let us take the example of the encomium, the laudatory genre par excellence, for which rhetorical manuals describe the essential elements: an orator should start with a captatio benevolentiae, go on to praise the addressee's descent, his or her upbringing, deeds in war (in the case of men) and in peace, and their relationship with the virtues of

body and mind, before offering an extensive comparison of the addressee with a famous figure (whom he or she, of course, exceeds), and ending with good wishes for the addressee. Imperial orations, adhering more or less closely to these guidelines, are extant from the entire Palaiologan period,¹⁰⁰ but poetry poses a serious problem. The encomium is very rare in late Byzantine poetry, while encomiastic elements, often dominating entire texts, are found ubiquitously.¹⁰¹ To speak about praise in late Byzantine poetry in terms of a genre is thus of limited value, whereas it does make sense to speak about it as a literary mode,¹⁰² which I understand as "a selection or abstraction" from genre.¹⁰³ The mode has no fixed external form, but uses certain thematic, rhetorical, or functional elements of the genre. Terminology is telling: while genre names come as nouns (encomium), modes are usually referred to with an adjective (encomiastic).¹⁰⁴ With this distinction in

96 See, on a theoretical level, Menander, *On Epideictic Speeches* 368.1–377.30 (Russell and Wilson, *Menander Rhetor*, 76–95); Aphthonios, *Progymnasmata* 8 (M. Patillon, ed., *Corpus rhetoricum I: Anonyme: Préambule à la rhétorique. Aphthonios: Progymnasmata. Pseudo-Hermogène: Progymnasmata* [Paris, 2008], 131–37).

97 On the dedicatory epigram, see A. Rhoby, "The Structure of Inscriptional Dedicatory Epigrams in Byzantium," in *La poesia tardoantica e medievale: IV Convegno internazionale di studi, Perugia, 15–17 novembre 2007: Atti in onore di Antonino Isola per il 70° genetliaco*, ed. C. Burini De Lorenzi and M. de Gaetano, Centro internazionale di studi sulla poesia greca e latina in età tardoantica e medievale Quaderni 5 (Alessandria, 2010), 309–32.

98 See M. Kulhánková, "For Old Men Too Can Play, Albeit More Wisely So: The Game of Discourses in the *Ptochoprodromika*," in Marciniak and Nilsson, *Satire*, 304–23, at 313.

99 The literature on genre theory is vast; my understanding is inspired by, but not in its entirety adopted from, J. Frow, *Genre*, 2nd ed., *The New Critical Idiom* (London, 2015); R. Zymner, ed., *Handbuch Gattungstheorie* (Stuttgart, 2010); and K. W. Hempfer, "Zum begrifflichen Status der Gattungsbegriffe: Von 'Klassen' zu 'Familienähnlichkeiten' und 'Prototypen,'" *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur* 120 (2010): 14–32.

100 On imperial orations in late Byzantium, see I. Toth, "Rhetorical Theatron in Late Byzantium: The Example of Palaiologan Imperial Orations," in *Theatron: Rhetorische Kultur in Spätantike und Mittelalter*, ed. M. Grünbart, Millennium-Studien 13 (Berlin, 2007), 429–48, and Angelov, *Imperial Ideology*, 51–64. Both authors stress that taking textbooks and earlier orations as models did not mean epigonic following, but bounded and carefully crafted creativity.

101 Take, for instance, Manuel Philes, who wrote hundreds of encomiastic poems, about ten of which could possibly be described as encomia proper (see Kubina, *Die enkomiasische Dichtung*, 41–71). Manuel Holobolos, in the thirteenth century, wrote some twenty poems for the *prokypsis* ceremony praising Michael VIII and Andronikos II Palaiologos, but none of them could confidently be described as a fully-fledged encomium (J. F. Boissonade, ed., *Anecdota Graeca e codicibus regii*, 5 vols. [Paris, 1829–1833], 5:159–82; X. Siderides, "Μανουὴλ Ὀλοβόλου ἐγκώμιον εἰς Μιχαὴλ Ἡ' Παλαιολόγου," *Ἐπ. Ἐτ. Βυζ. Σπ.* 3 [1926]: 168–91). An exception to this rule might be John Katakalon, who wrote a poem of 422 political verses to emperor John V Palaiologos, commissioned by the metropolitan of Adrianopolis (PG 158, 961–70).

102 On the encomiastic genre and mode in Byzantine poetry, see Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry*, 2:19–29; W. Hörandner, "Les conceptions du bon souverain dans la poésie byzantine," in *Facettes de la littérature byzantine: Contributions choisies*, ed. P. Odorico, A. Rhoby, and E. Schiffer, *Dossiers byzantins* 17 (Paris, 2017), 207–19 (originally published in "L'éducation au gouvernement et à la vie": *La tradition des "règles de vie" de l'Antiquité au Moyen-Âge, Actes du colloque international, Pise, 18–19 mars 2005*, ed. P. Odorico [Paris, 2009], 103–14); and, as a case study on the fourteenth-century poet Manuel Philes, Kubina, *Die enkomiasische Dichtung*, 41–78.

103 A. Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), 56.

104 See furthermore Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 106–11; see also Frow, *genre*, 69–74; and K. W. Hempfer, "Generische Allgemeinheitsgrade," in Zymner, *Gattungstheorie*, 15–19.

mind, we shall analyze how Sgouropoulos's poems partake of Byzantine literary genres and modes.¹⁰⁵

An ad hoc evaluation of the genres of Sgouropoulos's poems might have the following result: Poem 1 could be classified as a verse letter, Poem 2 as a mirror of princes, and the latter half of Poem 5 as an invective. But such a classification would bring with it a number of problems. Most obviously, Poems 3, 4, and 6a, as well as the first part of 5, are not included in this system, as they do not include clear generic markers. Secondly, the generic classifications of these poems concern three different criteria (although, of course, each is connected to various distinct features): the medium (verse letter), the content (mirror of princes), and the function (to blame or an invective).¹⁰⁶ Finally, reading all six poems by Sgouropoulos to Alexios leaves one with the impression of them as, despite their apparent variety, forming an internally coherent text corpus, united by various features: their manuscript transmission; their address to Alexios; their language, style, and meter; common motifs; and the complex entanglement of praise, abuse, and advice. If we understand genre not as an abstract category, but as a group of texts resembling, and linked to, each other, assigning the poems to different genres would tear these clearly connected poems apart from each other. In fact, the concept of genre as such does not help a great deal in understanding their place in literary history. Instead, the dominant features of praise, abuse, and advice in Sgouropoulos's poems are pertinent to various literary modes.

One would expect praise to be a key element in poems directed to an emperor; and the rubric to Sgouropoulos's poems indeed makes claims to the "encomiastic" character of these texts (see above). And yet, praise plays an unwonted and devious role in Sgouropoulos's poems—not because they do not include "full" encomia, which are very rare in late Byzantine poetry in general, but because praise is either absent (Poems 1–3) or used ironically (Poems 4–6a). The term antiphrasis, with which Sgouropoulos betrays his ironic reversal of praise into its opposite, is

telling in terms of generic modulation, for it can obviously be associated with the genre invective (*psogos*), which is often described as an inverted encomium.¹⁰⁷ Encomiastic texts in general are not free of critical elements, which often appear in the form of advice, and sometimes deviate from typical encomiastic patterns.¹⁰⁸ Some laudatory orations even show clear signs of subverted praise; yet while this must have been detectable for those acquainted with the rhetorical and political traditions, these texts are nowhere near as explicitly subversive as Sgouropoulos's poems,¹⁰⁹ which are decidedly un-encomiastic. In fact, not only inverted praise, but fierce abuse is prevalent in them, thus making his "encomiastic verses" more akin to other Byzantine invectives and invective texts.¹¹⁰

However, the most glaring peculiarity of Sgouropoulos's poetry is the intensity of its substantive abuse as well as its exalted object, namely the emperor. Acrid verbal abuse is found across the centuries in learned poetry, but it often comes either in the guise of satire directed at certain groups of people¹¹¹ or, if directed against a specific person, is often linked to competition between literati.¹¹² Furthermore, these poems often

107 See, for instance, Aphthonios, *Progymnasmata* 9.2–3 (Patillon, *Corpus rhetoricum* I, 137).

108 See Angelov, "Byzantine Imperial Panegyric"; Mullett, "How to Criticise."

109 On power and subversion in orations, see Mullett, "How to Criticise," 251–56.

110 English terminology is a problem here because the noun and the adjective "invective" are the same, thus complicating the easily graspable difference between genre and mode.

111 See Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry*, 2:119–44; N. Zagklas, "Satire in the Komnenian Period: Poetry, Satirical Strands, and Intellectual Antagonism," in Marciniak and Nilsson, *Satire*, 279–303, at 281–93; and the classic study by B. Baldwin, "A Talent to Abuse: Some Aspects of Byzantine Satire," *ByzF* 8 (1982): 19–28.

112 See, for instance, E. van Opstall, "The Cicada and the Dung Beetle," in Marciniak and Nilsson, *Satire*, 152–76. Examples of such intellectual quarrels are known from the tenth century onwards; cf., e.g., Constantine the Rhodian against Leo Choirosphaktes and Theodore of Paphlagon; John Geometres against Stylianos; Michael Psellos against Sabbaites; Christopher Mitylenaios against anonymous detractors; an anonymous twelfth-century monk against a certain John; or John Tzetzes against various contemporaries. Roughly contemporary to Sgouropoulos is the octosyllabic invective by John Katrares against Neophytos (I. Dujčev, "Bŭlgarski dumi vŭv vizantiŭski stikhove ot XIV vek = Prouchvaniia vŭrkhu bŭlgarskoto srednovekovie, XVIII," *BAN* 41, *Klon istoriko-filologichen* 21 [1949]: 130–50).

105 In Byzantine studies, Martin Hinterberger was one of the first to describe this difference between genre and mode with reference to the "autobiography" and "autobiographic" traditions (although without using the term "mode" [German "Modus" or "Schreibweise"]; see M. Hinterberger, *Autobiographische Traditionen in Byzanz*, WByzSt 22 [Vienna, 1999], 43–48 and 58–62).

106 On the multiplicity of criteria for defining a genre, see Zymner, *Gattungstheorie*, 29–46.

target single aspects of the persons addressed, such as his (only rarely her) ugliness, exaggerated lust, or stupidity, with the addressees of the abuse tagged with insulting epithets and labels. Vigorous reproof of the emperor in highbrow Byzantine texts occurs, if at all, in texts *about* the emperor, not in those addressed *to* him.¹¹³ And while we know of satirical songs chanted by the populace or the demes at emperors to ridicule them, these poems exhibit a low language register and are incorporated into historiographical works rather than transmitted as stand-alone literary pieces. They were articulated by semi-anonymous groups of people who were less vulnerable to retribution than an identifiable individual.¹¹⁴ Sgouropoulos deviates from all of these trends. He does not abstain from castigating the emperor in literary poems addressed directly *to* him. He does not single out and exaggerate individual weaknesses of the emperor (related to, for instance, his physical appearance or sexuality), but speaks about the shortcomings of his imperial comportment (giving his critique a grave rather than a playful character). And he does not call the emperor names. The only passage that equals the level of an invective, which usually finds expression between individuals, is the detailed description of the filthy, obnoxious, half-decayed owl in Poem 5 (vv. 5.100–125 and 218–27; cf. also 6a.19–35); and even there, the invective passage is interrupted by lengthy advice to the emperor (vv. 5.144–217). That this level of invective is restricted to the owl makes sense as poetic abuse is usually something reserved for peers, in this case apparently for a state official who was rivaling Sgouropoulos. At the same time, it is doubtful whether Poems 3–6a were ever presented to the emperor (unless one presumes that Alexios was outstandingly self-deprecating, possessing a peculiar kind of humor). As an audience, one might instead think of a group of

politically like-minded persons, one of the factions of the Trapezuntine civil war, united in their disapproval of the emperor and his “owl.” Regardless, the analysis of the poems makes it sufficiently clear that blame, not praise, is a core element of Sgouropoulos’s poems to Alexios, especially from Poem 3 onwards. However, it is the invective mode, often in the guise of inverted praise, that is essential for the understanding of his poems, while the invective genre, as it is known from other poems, plays only a subordinate role.

Between praise and abuse, we find advice at the heart of Sgouropoulos’s poems.¹¹⁵ Advice to an emperor inherently includes elements of praise to ensure that the addressee would be favorably disposed to the advisor and consider his words carefully, while every exhortation also necessarily includes elements of at least implicit criticism, as they urge the addressee to improve his or her conduct, and thus suggest that there is room for improvement.¹¹⁶ Of special relevance in this respect is Poem 2, which could be labeled as a “mirror of princes,” as it focuses exclusively on teaching imperial virtues and behavior. The existence of this genre in Byzantium is debated, as there are only a very few texts wholly dedicated to presenting and insisting on the virtues of an emperor.¹¹⁷ As Sgouropoulos’s Poem 2 is such a rare text, however, it should be added to any future discussion of the genre. Yet the almost complete absence of praise is remarkable given the great social distance between the poet and his addressee. Poem 1 similarly focuses on advice, but in a less abstract and more concrete way, tailored to the particular historical

113 See, for instance, F. Tinnefeld, *Kategorien der Kaiserkritik in der byzantinischen Historiographie von Prokop bis Niketas Choniates* (Munich, 1971), 191–92, and P. Magdalino, “Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik,” *Speculum* 58.2 (1983): 326–46; Magdalino, “Political Satire,” 114–17.

114 See F. Bernard, “Laughter, Derision, and Abuse in Byzantine Verse,” in Marciniak and Nilsson, *Satire*, 39–61, at 46–54. These are associated with the so-called mock parades, performed to ridicule enemies or defeated men; see Magdalino, “Political Satire,” 107–14; Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry*, 2:128–33; and, in a larger context, P. Magdalino, “Tourner en dérision à Byzance,” in *La dérision au Moyen Âge: De la pratique sociale au rituel politique*, ed. É. Crouzet-Pavan, *Cultures et civilisations médiévales* 38 (Paris, 2007), 55–72.

115 On the entanglement of praise, blame, and exhortation, see A. Giannouli, “Paränese zwischen Enkomion und Psogos: Zur Gattungseinordnung byzantinischer Fürstenspiegel,” in *Imitatio, aemulatio, variatio: Akten des internationalen wissenschaftlichen Symposions zur byzantinischen Sprache und Literatur* (Wien, 22.–25. Oktober 2008), ed. A. Rhoby and E. Schiffer, *Veröffentlichung zur Byzanzforschung* 21 (Vienna, 2010), 119–28.

116 See Giannouli, “Paränese zwischen Enkomion und Psogos,” 123–24.

117 P. Odorico, “Les miroirs des princes à Byzance: Une lecture horizontale,” in Odorico, *L’éducation au gouvernement et à la vie*, 223–46, and similarly D. R. Reinsch, “Bemerkungen zu einirgen byzantinischen ‘Fürstenspiegeln’ des 11. und 12. Jahrhunderts,” in *Synesios von Kyrene: Politik, Literatur, Philosophie*, ed. H. Seng and L. M. Hoffmann, *Studies in Byzantine History and Civilization* 6 (Turnhout, 2012), 404–19, in particular, have campaigned against the existence of such a genre. Foundational on the topic, but with reference to the mirror of princes as a genre, is still G. Prinzing, “Beobachtungen zu ‘integrierten’ Fürstenspiegeln der Byzantiner,” *JÖB* 38 (1988): 1–31.

situation in which the poem was written. If we look at the entire collection, it is clear that the paraenetic, i.e., exhortative, mode is much more prevalent than the “mirror of princes” as a genre (if ever such a genre existed). Overall, we find an evolution in the kind of exhortation employed in Sgouropoulos’s poems. While Poems 1 and 2 contain serious attempts to change the emperor’s behavior and to establish the author as Alexios’s teacher, from Poem 3 onwards moral advice is used in order to expose the emperor’s wickedness and as an ironic device to highlight the qualities which Alexios did *not* possess. There is a fine line in paraenetic texts between advice and abuse, and one could be reproached in the guise of exhortation.¹¹⁸ Sgouropoulos, however, makes no pretense of his dismissive stance toward the emperor, his bitter advice leaving no doubt that his exhortations are futile; thus, he exceeds the rather subtle modulations in other paraenetic texts in favor of savage critique.¹¹⁹

So what is the place of Sgouropoulos’s poems in the history of Byzantine poetry? As argued above, the author makes use of a whole set of familiar literary modes, functions, forms, and rhetorical figures without adhering to a specific literary genre, forming a nonetheless coherent ensemble. To use a metaphor from cultural studies, Sgouropoulos’s poems could best be described as “salad bowls” rather than “melting pots”—they are made up of various ingredients recombined to produce a unique flavor, but the flavors have not dissolved into an undifferentiated aggregation and cannot be said to constitute an entirely new type of dish—or genre.¹²⁰ Sgouropoulos’s poems are excellent examples of texts

defying generic classification, while at the same time partaking of generic logics in their fidelity to certain established literary modes.¹²¹ Refusing to label them does not mean denying their relationships to literary genres—and one can well argue that every text partakes of generic logics¹²²—but it means doing justice to their idiosyncratic nature. These poems are volatile literary experiments, which, in a way, mirror the instability of their social context of production within their shifting literary guises.



A detailed analysis of the little-known poetic oeuvre of the protonotarios Stephanos Sgouropoulos, addressed to the young Trapezuntine emperor Alexios III Megas Komnenos, and estimated to originate from between 1349 and the early 1350s, has brought to light an iridescent literary corpus, rooted in the calamities of its time and intertwined with Byzantine literary tradition. It offers a rare glimpse into the cultural, political, and social life of Trebizond in the middle of the fourteenth century, a time as turbulent as it is now obscure, due to the scarcity of surviving written sources. Sgouropoulos employs an innovative method of skirting, subverting, and recombining various literary modes, above all the encomiastic, the invective, and the paraenetic, in order to create unique poetry occasioned by unique political and personal circumstances, reflecting a world in turmoil in a literary way. His insolent verses about a reigning emperor, addressed to this very emperor, are truly extraordinary, and one finds nothing else of its kind in the history of later Byzantine poetry.

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118 Cf. Synesios, often considered the archetypal producer of “mirrors of princes,” in *On royalty* 15: σχήματι παραινέσεως δνειδίζειν (N. Terzaghi, ed., *Synesii Cyrenensis opuscula* [Rome, 1944], 35.2–3); quotation at Reinsch, “Bemerkungen,” 408.

119 One should also note that paraenetic poetry in Byzantium does not usually deal with political issues, but rather treats moral themes such as virtue and vice, piety, or the vanity of life, and is usually directed toward children, students, friends, monks, or a general audience (see Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry*, 2:210–15; M. D. Lauxtermann, “Parisinus Graecus 400: Poetry and Paraenesis in Cyprus,” *REB* 79 [2021]: 149–81, at 165–69; G. Paoletti, “The Multifarious Muse: Two Palaeologan Collections of Paraenetic Chapters” [PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2020], 39–43), which is a further indication of how Sgouropoulos, while using established literary modes, bursts through generic boundaries.

120 See M. Allen, *GenReVisions: Genre Experimentation and World-Construction in Contemporary Anglophone Literature*, Anglistische Forschungen 468 (Heidelberg, 2020), 59.

121 Cf. Frow, *Genre*, 121, on a modern nursery rhyme: “In fusing quite incompatible genres this poem successfully defies generic classification, while still drawing on generic logics.”

122 See Frow, *Genre* 30–31.

☞ THIS ARTICLE GREATLY BENEFITED FROM the help of my colleagues: Marc Lauxtermann, Andreas Rhoby, and Rudolf Stefec read, and commented on, earlier drafts of this paper; the anonymous reviewers, too, greatly helped me to sharpen my argument. Christos Kafasis shared his unpublished doctoral work with me,

while John Hess spent hours to set my English straight. I am grateful to all of them for their support. This paper was written as part of the project “Late Byzantine Poetry (from the Fourth Crusade until the End of the Empire),” funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF, project no. T-1045 G25).